

## SONGS FOR TEACHING PRONUNCIATION: A GUIDING MODEL

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### Abstract

*Songs have been used as an excellent tool for teaching a second language; however, their advantages as a means to teach pronunciation could be explored in a more frequent and consistent way. In this study a guiding model for teachers that are designing didactic materials to develop the phonetic-phonological component through songs is proposed. This model is based on a literature review and on a reorganization of the existing information. By going through its main questions and subtopics, a teacher can more easily design the didactic materials that are adjusted to the needs of the specific teaching context and foster the learning of pronunciation through songs.*

**Key words:** didactic materials design, second language teaching, songs, teaching pronunciation

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### The importance of teaching pronunciation in a second/ foreign language

Some second/ foreign language<sup>2</sup> teachers emphasize communicative competence so much that they end up undervaluing the teaching of pronunciation. Therefore, it is pertinent to review some arguments supporting the importance of this. In order better to understand the importance of teaching pronunciation, it is necessary to spell out some concepts. Specifically, in the analysis of L2 pronunciation, three distinct properties can be identified: (i) ‘intelligibility’, the level of clarity of an oral production observable by the amount of elements that are understood by the listeners; (ii) ‘comprehensibility’, the degree of difficulty experienced by the listeners in understanding an utterance; (iii) ‘accentedness’, the extent to which the L2 speech differs from the native one

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<sup>2</sup> Although there is some discussion in the literature about the differences between the processes of learning a second and a foreign language (e.g. Madeira, 2017), in this article those two situations will not be distinguished and the expression *second language* or *L2* will be adopted to refer to any language learned after the native one, the mother tongue, *L1*.

according to the listener's perception (Derwing & Munro, 2005). These three properties show, simultaneously, a partial independence of each other and various interrelations.

One of the reasons to promote the phonetic-phonological domain<sup>3</sup> is the need to ensure a good level of intelligibility. In every language there are minimal pairs and paronym words. So, only sufficiently intelligible articulation can avoid the confusion of similar words and the resulting communication problems (Saito, 2007). In addition, several studies report the interrelationship between oral skills of production and comprehension: inaccuracies in pronunciation create difficulties in perception and vice versa (Yang et al., 2015). Also, increasing the comprehensibility and decreasing the accentedness in the speech of the learner helps communication to take place more easily and without major disruption (Derwing & Munro, 2005). If the ease of communicating with native speakers is greater, then the number of interactions with these will most probably also increase. And this means more opportunities to use the language in real communicative situations, with more input and output occurring in the second language.

Finally, pronunciation is, for native speakers, one of the main language proficiency indicators in the evaluation made of foreign learners (Moyer, 2014), and this evaluation can have very relevant social implications, for example in terms of employment, personal image and the possibility of pursuing studies in certain circumstances.

### **The contribution of the present work**

To respond to the phonetic-phonological 'challenges' experienced by L2 learners, teachers can use several strategies proposed for the teaching of second languages (e.g., Alves, 2015; Derwin & Munro, 2014; Kruk & Pawlak, 2014; Saz, Rodríguez, Lleida, Ricardo Rodríguez, & Vaquero, 2010). In this work one of those possibilities will be discussed: the use of songs with special emphasis on phonetic-phonological training. Although there are already proposals related to the pedagogical use of songs in teaching pronunciation in a second language (e.g., Christiano, 2009;

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<sup>3</sup> The L2 pronunciation includes several features (e.g. Grant, 2014): segmental; suprasegmental or prosodic; peripheral; global. The segmental features refer to the sounds properties, as well as the phonological processes in which they are involved; the suprasegmental ones deal with units larger than the speech sound (e.g. syllables, tones, intonation, stress). Also, both the segmental and suprasegmental features have a phonetic as well as a phonological nature. As it is well known, the phonology of a language covers how the phonetic properties are represented in the abstract linguistic knowledge and the rules for using these phonetic properties with distinctive value. This component of the speaker's grammatical knowledge is therefore the abstract system of signs and rules which is the basis for the use (both in production and perception) of phonetic realities (physical, concrete sound elements) with a linguistic meaning. Consequently, in order to teach pronunciation, we have to promote the development of the whole phonetic-phonological domain or language component.

Ludke, 2009; Montaner, 2006; Nobre-Oliveira, 2007; Simpson, 2015), the potential of this means should be highlighted and deepened. Also, designing new didactic materials from scratch or adjusting existing materials to specific needs is demanding in terms of time consumption and decisions to be taken. Consequently, a model that guides teachers in those tasks would facilitate their work. Given this situation, the present paper aims to propose a guiding model (under the form of a schematic overview) of the song's pedagogical use as a means for phonetic-phonological development. The creation of that guiding model is based on a literature review and the subsequent systematization and reorganization of existing information in the literature. The model is intended to help in designing didactic sequences based on songs to teach pronunciation of any language.

This paper has three parts. In the introduction, the importance of teaching pronunciation in a second language was maintained and this work's goal was presented. In the main part of the work, the song is presented as a means to promote pronunciation development, as well as other skills. More specifically, we shall highlight: the value of the song as a means for teaching second languages; the criteria on which to select it; some key ideas to consider when using it for teaching a second language; strategies for phonetic training. This part ends with the presentation of the guiding model for using a song to train pronunciation in L2 teaching, a schematic overview to guide the design of didactic sequences. The last part consists of some final remarks.

## **Using songs as a means of phonetic-phonological development**

### ***Songs as a valuable tool in teaching L2***

Enthusiasm for the song as a tool in the L2 teaching is not a recent phenomenon (Engh, 2013). I will systematize the potential of this cultural object, based on several proposals (especially Betti, 2012; Coelho de Souza, 2014; Keskin, 2011; Ludke, 2009; Medina, 2002; Montaner, 2006; Santos Asensi, 1996; Simpson, 2015).

The song allows us to explore very different objectives simultaneously. As happens with other oral or written texts, the song can lead to promote many skills, including the following: (i) the linguistic domain (e.g., vocabulary, morphosyntax or phonetic-phonology); (ii) the communicative domain (e.g., speech acts, appropriateness to the context, greeting formulas); (iii) the cultural field (e.g., current interests of native speakers, historical or cultural facts of the people, common standpoints among native speakers, literature) (Betti, 2012; Engh, 2013; Rodríguez López, 2006). However, these advantages become even more important in that they

are associated with the possibility of effortlessly promoting the four-basic linguistic and communicative skills: oral comprehension and expression; written reception and production (see suggestions in Ludke, 2009; Medina, 2002; Rodríguez López, 2006). In fact, a song includes lyrics: as an oral text, the lyrics may be grounds for listening comprehension exercises; when in written form, they also allow for training in reading comprehension. Again, the song is a very easy starting point to create oral production and writing tasks (e.g., oral tasks: expressing an opinion on the song, debating on the topic, dramatizing parts of the text, singing or reading it aloud; written activities: preparing a small review of the song, rewriting the text with any changes set by the teacher, such as the replacement of the *amor*, ‘love’, for the words *valor*, ‘value’, or *calor*, ‘heat’).

In addition to these aspects, the song is made up of lyrics and music elements, which present particularly useful characteristics in teaching a foreign language. As far as the *lyrics* are concerned, the following properties can be highlighted:

(i) they constitute an authentic text (e.g., Medina, 2002; Santos Asensi, 1996) and artwork (e.g., Coelho de Souza, 2014; Keskin, 2011) (thus allowing for knowing the culture “from within” and increasing the motivation to know the other);

(ii) they are brief (e.g., Santos Asensi, 1996), which facilitates their use in class;

(iii) they typically include repetitions (e.g., Engh, 2013; Santos Asensi, 1996), thus avoiding overloading learners with too much new information; additionally, this ‘natural’ repetition serves to foster learning in a ‘natural’ and interesting way;

(iv) they present diversity in terms of language registers (e.g., Betti, 2012), as there are lyrical, literary, current and colloquial registers; and of text types (e.g., Santos Asensi, 1996), because they can present passages that are descriptive, narrative, epistolary, poetic, conversational, etc.;

(v) because they consist, at times, of a short and literary text (see points (ii) and (iv)), they allow us to explore the potential of literature in the foreign language classroom (e.g., Bizarro, 2008).

The *music* increases the educational potential of the song as well, for several reasons:

(i) it fosters the development of the aesthetic sensibility of learners (e.g., Coelho de Souza, 2014) and of their musical intelligence (e.g., Medina, 2002);

(ii) it contributes to increased motivation in second language learning (e.g. Montaner, 2006; Rodríguez López, 2006), since it is a product associated with beauty and leisure, probably arousing curiosity for different contexts, lives and cultures;

(iii) it promotes a relaxed and disinhibiting environment (e.g. Keskin, 2011; Medina, 2002), which facilitates taking risks and the learning of a different language and culture;

(iv) it turns the repetition needed for learning into something natural (e.g., Ashtian & Zafarghandi, 2015; Betti, 2012), and may even lead learners to autonomously repeat the listening and singing of lyrics;

(v) it contributes to the internalization of new vocabulary and language structures, since there is evidence that the melody and the rhythm facilitate memorization (e.g., Keskin, 2011; Schön et al, 2008).

Coelho de Souza (2014) also highlights various potentialities specific to a *song*, namely the fact of promoting in learners the ability to discover the senses which result from the combination of lyrics and music.

In the specific case of the *phonetic-phonological training*, the pedagogical value of the song stands out even more. In terms of competence, a song allows the teacher to explore various relevant topics:

(i) segments (it being possible to select songs with more occurrences of sounds difficult for the students);

(ii) coarticulation and syllabic structure (because there are lyrics in which certain sound sequences or syllabic structures are more challenging and therefore an excellent means of articulation training);

(iii) word stress (as the memorization of the oral form of new words should include the location of primary stress);

(iv) rhythm and intonation (although some songs generate additional difficulties for playing with rhythm and intonation, in general the music helps to show the rhythm of the language - Betti, 2012; Santos Asensi, 1996).

Teaching pronunciation through songs has other advantages also. Being an authentic document, the song can show different rates of speed which are common in real language usage (ranging from a very slow tempo song to a high-speed rap song). In fact, there is evidence that it can promote better speech production (Ashtian & Zafarghandi, 2015) and listening

comprehension (Engh, 2013). In addition, the song can play an important role as oral production model for learners: nowadays access to it is quite affordable (for example, via the Internet) and normally it is an oral production endowed with clarity and good sound condition. Finally, as shown in Section 2.4, the practice is critical to improving L2 pronunciation. Since a song often includes many repetitions and can be sufficiently attractive to make learners listen to it and sing it on their own initiative, the introduction of songs in class will quite likely lead to repetition and consequent improvement of learners' phonetic habits in the L2 (Betti, 2012).

### ***Criteria for the selection of songs***

Several authors refer to the need for different criteria in choosing a song to use in an educational context (Keskin, 2011; Ludke, 2009; Santos Asensi, 1996).

Firstly, it is obviously necessary to bear in mind the educational objectives to be achieved and select the song accordingly (Christiano, 2009; Simpson, 2015). For example, if we intend to address verbal inflection, we must ensure that the lyrics feature several verb forms in the desired tenses and moods; if the objective is to train perception of a segmental contrast, a relatively high number of occurrences of those segments is needed; if the objective is the cultural domain, the choice should consider the relevance of the song theme and its value as an example of the cultural topic to address.

Secondly, it is also important to consider many other aspects independent of the didactic purpose. The song should be ethically appropriate to the teaching context, ensuring, for example, that there is no promotion of intolerant attitudes and no dealing with topics and situations that could injure the susceptibility of learners due to some aspect of their personal or family situation, etc. It should present a difficulty level appropriate to the students' proficiency, especially in terms of vocabulary, morphosyntactic structures and pragmatic skills (Keskin, 2011). Ideally, the selected song should also have strong chances of pleasing the students, addressing issues that interest them, presenting a musical style and rhythm they are fond of, being sung by an artist they admire, etc. (Ludke, 2009; Rodríguez López, 2006). Also, it is preferably a song that the teacher himself/herself enjoys and can sing, because the teacher's enthusiasm tends to enliven the students, who will feel more encouraged to sing if the teacher himself/herself starts first (Ludke, 2009). Another criterion to consider is the cultural value of the song (Santos Asensi, 1996): even if the main objective of the teaching sequence consists of a linguistic topic, it is preferable to use

songs with a strong cultural value (associated with a political, social, artistic event...) rather than other possible choices addressing the same objectives.

Attention should also be paid to various aspects more related to the audio(visual) aspects of the song. Ideally, it should be "strong" music, in the sense that it easily captures attention, is retained and repeated in learners' memory, it is kept in one's mind and ear (Santos Asensi, 1996). The song's emotional potential should also be high (Betti, 2012): if features such as the theme, the melody or the relationship between theme and rhythm enable a greater emotional or affective response from the learners, then the pedagogical use of the song will likely generate more learning. Preference should also be given to good recordings of a song and songs that are easily accessible to students outside the class (e.g., Santos Asensi, 1996). A final suggestion is to give preference, as far as possible, to songs featuring a suitable videoclip (Betti, 2012): it is more likely that the learner will listen to the song more often if it is accompanied by an appealing visual format, able to arouse a deeper emotional response.

When the song is being used mainly for phonetic-phonological development, a few more precautions should be emphasized. In addition to the general criteria mentioned above, it will be important to consider: (i) the occurrence frequency of the phonetic-phonological topic to be explored (the higher the frequency, the richer the input); (ii) the general level of phonetic-phonological difficulties (for instance, in order to train the contrast between voiced and unvoiced consonants, it may be important that the song does not include cases of difficult coarticulation, as these may impose an overload of articulatory effort on the learners and distract from the main phonetic objective); (iii) the possible degree of difficulty resulting from musical interference with the lyrics (Santos Asensi, 1996; for example, the rhythm or the melody of a certain song can lead to significant losses in terms of accuracy and ease of articulation, and this should be avoided).

### ***Using songs***

Songs can be used for didactic purposes in very different ways. In the literature we can find abundant directions regarding how to explore different linguistic and cultural aspects through songs (e.g., Ludke, 2009; Medina, 2002; Montaner, 2006; Simpson, 2015), as well as specific didactic proposals (e.g., Betti, 2012; Coelho de Souza, 2014; Fernandes, 2015; Ludke, 2009). In this section, some general principles about the didactic use of songs will be highlighted.

One of the general principles--the importance of exploring the song in three major stages: pre-listening, listening and post-listening--appears explicitly in some authors (Christiano, 2009;

Keskin, 2011; Montaner, 2006) and implicitly in others (Ludke, 2009). The pre-listening phase should prepare learners for listening to the song, by contextualizing the activity, motivating the learners, and giving them the necessary tools to perform the listening task (new vocabulary, information about the singer or other cultural references, clear and precise information about the task to be carried out during the listening phase). The listening phase should promote a good understanding of the song. At this stage, the students' attention should be focused on the relevant topics, so that they are not overwhelmed with too much information to process. In the post-listening phase, several activities can be performed to develop knowledge of the (linguistic, communicative and / or cultural) topics associated with the song, as well as the four basic language skills (Keskin, 2011; Ludke, 2009).

Another general principle to consider in the preparation of didactic sequences is to establish a certain harmony and unity throughout the tasks. To lead the learner over several topics in an interesting, motivated and meaningful way, it is important that the activities and topics are indeed interrelated, the transition from one job to the next one being something natural, expected and purposeful. Furthermore, an integrated approach to various skills and knowledge is desirable, although it is also important to define objectives which are given greater attention in a certain didactic proposal. For example, even if the teacher chooses to highlight the phonetic-phonological aspects in a didactic sequence, this activity should integrate the promotion of other skills as well, for example those related to culture and communication.

It is also appropriate that the chosen strategies make good use of all the potentialities of the music, the lyrics and the song (see Section 2.1). Some examples can be mentioned. Music features the advantage of developing aesthetic sensitivity and musical intelligence; therefore, the exploitation of the song will be more fruitful, if it includes some tasks especially directed to the musical aspect (see the tasks proposed by Coelho de Souza (2014), such as questions about the pace and musical instruments, the definition of musical style, etc.). The lyrics are short authentic texts; so, it is possible to use them to show specific cultural aspects. The song, in turn, presents a wealth of meanings resulting from the lyrics, the music and the interaction between the two. For this reason, it is important to lead learners to explore and discover these meanings, for example, through questions that make them reflect on whether the music reinforces the meaning of the lyrics, and if so, by which mechanisms (see Coelho de Souza, 2014).

Using songs to improve the learners' phonetic-phonological skills requires consideration of other strategies besides the general principles just outlined. The following section will present those strategies.



## **Strategies for teaching pronunciation**

Strategies used for phonetic-phonological development should consider some key ideas outlined in several studies (Derwin & Munro, 2014; Grant, 2014; Hişmanoğlu, 2006; Wei, 2006). These key ideas include, for example, the *object* and *objectives* of teaching pronunciation, as well as the *factors* that condition it. In the current approaches based on research results, it is considered that teaching pronunciation should be guided by principles different from those used in the traditional approaches. These approaches are aimed at achieving the pronunciation of native speakers, by training the segment of production and giving the learner a purely passive role, without recognizing the importance of his/her motivation, autonomy and affective factors. Currently, the goal of teaching pronunciation is to achieve a good level of quality, but not exactly the native pronunciation. To reach this quality, teachers try to address all the phonetic-phonological properties of the target language (segmental and suprasegmental) and opt for strategies that increase the motivation and the autonomy of the learner (mastering pronunciation should be considered a goal desired by the students themselves) and consider the affective factors. For instance, the use of relaxation and disinhibiting techniques is advocated to limit the anxiety associated with L2 oral production and the resistance to adopt a different manner of speaking.

Another key issue in the definition of strategies is the choice between *more or less explicit teaching of pronunciation*. More specifically, three main types of approaches to the phonetic-phonological training can be considered according to the degree of explicitness: the analytical-linguistic approach (explicit), the intuitive-imitative one (implicit) and the integrative one (a combination of implicit and explicit teaching) (Hashemian & Fadaei, 2011). The first approach is the most traditional one and uses strategies such as phonetic transcription, the display of diagrams and photographs that illustrate the functioning of the segmental and suprasegmental properties, the detailed explanation of the articulation of certain segments accompanied by its modeling and recording and analysis of oral productions of learners. In fact, some studies emphasize the importance of metaphonological knowledge (Wrembel, 2011) and pronunciation learning strategies (Rokoszewska, 2014). The intuitive-imitative approach, as its name suggests, seeks to bring learners to internalize the foreign pronunciation in an intuitive, implicit, imitation-based way. So, the strategies associated with this approach include the imitation and repetition of the target words, as well as the use of short dialogues and minimal pairs to draw attention to the properties to learn. Some strategies, such as discrimination tasks based on minimal pairs, may even be integrated into either of the two approaches, depending on the (more or less explicit) treatment of the phenomenon.

However, the approach to be preferred is the integrative one – at least, according to several authors and results of empirical studies (Alves, 2015; Gilakjani, 2012; Hashemian & Fadaei, 2011). By combining the strengths of the analytical-linguistic and the intuitive-imitative approaches, the integrative one allows learners to: (i) develop a deeper, more analytical, conscious, metalinguistic, knowledge of language pronunciation, thus providing them with a better understanding of the target system and with means to monitor their own productions and making them more autonomous in their learning and in their performance; (ii) take advantage of the pedagogical value of repetition (which should lead to the automatization of linguistic habits, essential for the proper use of orality) and of intuitive learning (which offers the advantage of being cognitively less demanding).

Another important strategy in teaching pronunciation is to ensure that learners have intensive *practice* (e.g. Grant, 2014), which is also related to the repetition strategy. The internalization and automatization of speech habits demand that students use the target (segmental or suprasegmental) structures very often.

The way to achieve this practice should be based on another strategy: the progressive integration of the pronunciation teaching in *communicative activities* (Alves, 2015; Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Hashemian & Fadaei, 2011). Language is a very complex phenomenon and it is not enough to know how to produce it properly in controlled situations. Initially, controlled, decontextualized and not much meaningful contexts may be needed to make it possible to focus learners' effort on formal correctness. However, later, it is necessary to practice the phonetic-phonological skills in increasingly spontaneous and communicative tasks (so that the students' focus can be directed to content and fluency).

In fact, it is advisable to adopt what could be termed as 'a progressive and integrative communicative approach, with high levels of input and output, intensive practice'. This type of approach is explicitly defended by several authors (Alves, 2015; Celce-Murcia et al., 2010) and can be 'built' from the suggestions of other researchers (Ellis, 2005). When applying this approach, the starting point is making the 'rule' explicit by explaining the operation of a particular phonetic-phonological topic (since the analytic-linguistic approach has several advantages), possibly leading the learners to discover it on their own (see the learning advantages of discovery, for example, in Castelo, 2012; Hudson, 2008). Subsequently, this rule should be used in increasingly less controlled and more communicative contexts: firstly, in a context that is more controlled and repetitive, not much associated with realistic and meaningful communicative situations; secondly, in a little less controlled and more communicative context; finally, in tasks

requiring production and reception that are more spontaneous and closer to a real communicative situation. During the approach to this phonetic-phonological topic, the input should be abundant, given its crucial role (Ellis, 2005). As practice is also essential for automatizing a process, this approach also defends much practice since the moment the rule is already known in explicit terms. Due to the very important role of output and interaction in second language acquisition (Ellis, 2005), this practice also includes what may be termed "interactive output", that is, the use of the linguistic structures to acquire while interacting with other learners or with native speakers.

Several other strategies for pronunciation teaching should be emphasized. For instance, the internalization of speech habits can be encouraged by *various modalities* (auditory, visual, tactile) (Hişmanoğlu, 2006; Saz et al., 2010; Schön et al., 2008). By mutually reinforcing each other, the information processed through the different modalities contributes to faster and deeper learning. For example, to promote learning of the contrast between [s] and [z], we can associate the segment [s] to the sound, image, color and motion of a snake (snake hiss, drawing of an S-shaped snake, green, gesture evoking the movement of a snake) and the sound [z] to the properties of a bee (bee buzz, drawing of a bee flying in a Z-shaped way, yellow, gesture evocative of the flight of a bee). Nor should the strategy used in many learning situations of mobilizing students' *prior knowledge* be omitted (Barbosa, 2015). It will be important to recruit the skills achieved either in the field of mother tongue or in other languages. For example, the knowledge that there is a stressed syllable per word in English should be mobilized in learning a language such as Portuguese, by native speakers of tonal languages like Chinese. The establishment of comparisons between foreign languages and between the target language and the mother tongue can greatly facilitate the understanding of the functioning of phonetic-phonological aspects of the target language. Another recommendation for teaching pronunciation is the use of *authentic materials* as much as possible (Hashemian & Fadaei, 2011). These include utterances that are typical of real interaction situations (in terms of speech rate, rhythm, intonation, segment deletion processes in colloquial speech, phonetic variants of segments, etc.).

Finally, one should also select strategies that increase the learner's *autonomy* in phonetic-phonological development (Kruk & Pawlak, 2014). For instance, one can opt for songs that are available on the Internet and ask the learners to rehearse them, singing or reading at home. In class, the learners can participate in a mini-contest to choose the best lyrics reader or the best 'singer'.

## Using songs with emphasis on teaching pronunciation: a guiding model

We shall here propose a schematic overview of the content outlined in the previous sections on the use of songs in a second language teaching context. This synthesis (shown in Figure 1) is intended to function as a guiding model in the design of educational materials that use songs to teach a second language and especially emphasize the phonetic-phonological development.

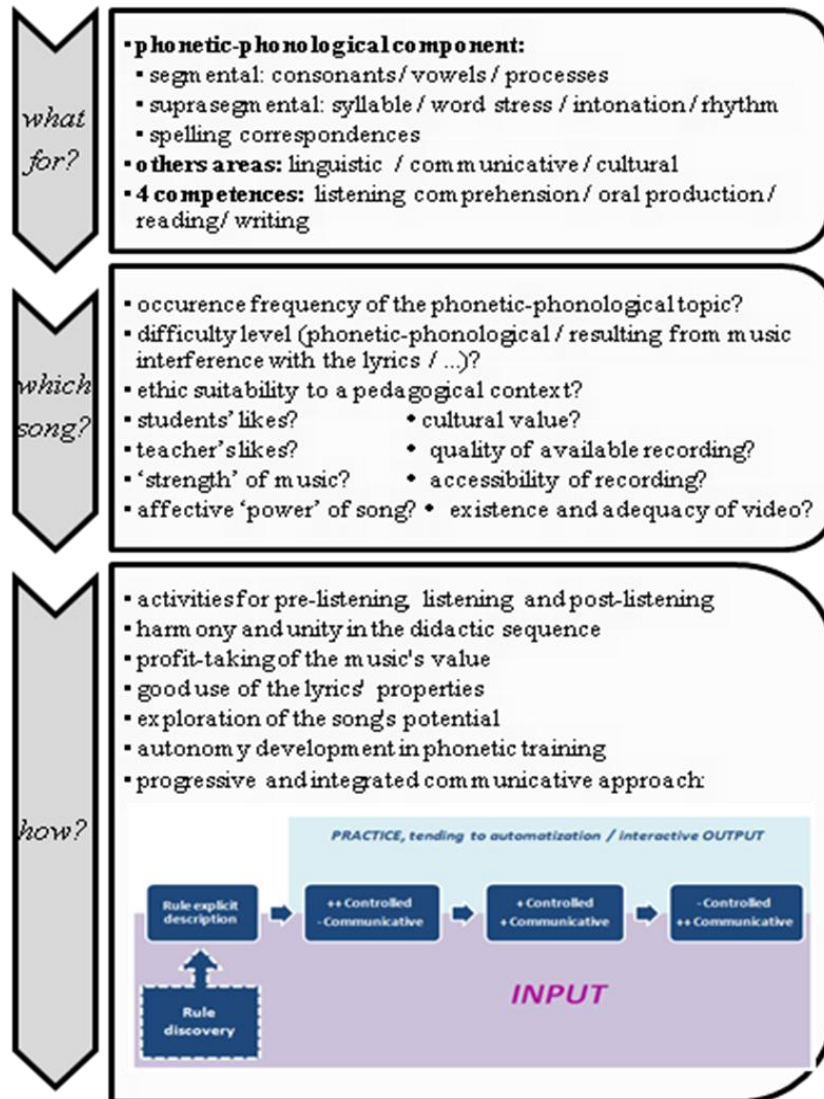


Figure 1: A guiding model for the use of songs to teach a second language and emphasize the phonetic-phonological development

Following the proposed model, during the design of teaching materials based on a song and intended to emphasize the phonetic-phonological development, teachers should seek to answer three main questions: (i) ‘what for?’ (to identify the objects of study to address and the specific objectives to be achieved); (ii) ‘which song?’ (to select the basis of their teaching sequence according to the most relevant criteria); (iii) ‘how?’ (to consider the principles associated with a choice of the most appropriate strategies). Related to each main question there are several other questions and topics to be addressed. If the teachers take into consideration each one of them, then the designed didactic material will surely be more adjusted to the goals and needs in the specific teaching context.

### **Final considerations**

Songs are excellent tools for teaching a second language, have been used for many decades and present great advantages for teaching pronunciation. Their use for this purpose should become more frequent and consistent. To have a model that guides teachers while designing didactic materials to teach pronunciation through songs would facilitate this endeavor. The goal of this paper was precisely to propose a guiding model of the song’s pedagogical use as a means for phonetic-phonological development, being the model based on a literature review and the subsequent systematization of existing information. Further research in this area should apply this model for designing materials for the teaching of different L2s and assess its usefulness. Also, it could be helpful to have this model validated by many teachers working in the area. They are the ones whom this work is intended to help.

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