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RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

A Competency-Based Approach to Organizing Differentiated Instruction: Criteria for Leveling Learning Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

Differentiated instruction is widely promoted as a response to learner diversity, yet in practice it is often implemented as an informal division of pupils into "strong" and "weak" groups, with tasks varying mainly in quantity rather than in cognitive and communicative demand. Such approaches can undermine equity, reduce academic rigor, and fail to provide transparent pathways for growth. A competency-based approach offers a principled alternative because it defines learning in terms of observable performance, clear criteria, and progressive levels of mastery that are independent of students' fixed labels. The study synthesizes didactic theory, mastery learning, outcome-based education, and formative assessment research, then proposes a set of criteria for leveling outcomes that can be applied across subjects, with particular relevance for language and literacy education. The results present a coherent model that connects competency descriptors, performance indicators, evidence requirements, and rubric-based criteria into a cycle of diagnosis, planning, instruction, feedback, and progression decisions. The discussion argues that competency-based leveling makes differentiation more ethical and manageable by shifting the focus from student categories to task demands and support needs, enabling flexible grouping and growth-oriented assessment. The article concludes with implications for curriculum design, teacher practice, and quality assurance in schools implementing differentiated instruction.

Keywords: Competency-based approach, differentiated instruction, learning outcomes, leveling criteria, mastery learning, formative assessment, rubrics, instructional design, inclusive education.

INTRODUCTION

Modern classrooms are characterized by persistent heterogeneity. Pupils differ in readiness, prior knowledge, learning pace, motivation, language experience, and access to cultural resources that shape academic development. Differentiated instruction has become a dominant pedagogical response to this diversity, aiming to ensure that all learners progress while maintaining common curricular goals. However, differentiation frequently remains methodologically weak. It is often equated with simplifying tasks for some learners and extending tasks for others, or with assigning "extra" work to faster pupils while providing more drills to those who struggle. These patterns can unintentionally institutionalize unequal expectations and transform differentiation into hidden tracking, where some learners repeatedly encounter low-demand tasks and therefore have limited opportunities to develop higher-order competencies.

A competency-based approach offers a different logic. Instead of treating learning as time-based coverage of content, competency-based education defines expected results as demonstrable abilities and emphasizes progression through levels of mastery. In such a framework, differentiation becomes the planned variation of learning pathways toward shared competencies, guided by transparent criteria for what counts as achievement at different levels. The focus shifts from labeling learners to specifying what performance looks like at successive stages of development and what forms of evidence can

validly demonstrate that performance. This shift is particularly valuable for ensuring equity: learners are not assigned permanently to a "low" group, but are supported to move from their current level toward higher levels, with criteria that remain stable and understandable.

Despite the conceptual promise of competency-based differentiation, schools often lack a clear system for leveling learning outcomes. Teachers may use intuitive notions such as "basic," "intermediate," and "advanced," but without agreed indicators or assessment logic. As a result, differentiated tasks can become inconsistent across classes and teachers, and assessment can remain norm-referenced rather than growth-oriented. The core problem is therefore not whether differentiation is needed, but how to organize it as a coherent didactic system grounded in competencies, criteria, and progression rules.

This article addresses that problem by proposing criteria for leveling learning outcomes within a competency-based approach to differentiated instruction. The study is guided by three questions. How can competency-based logic be used to structure differentiated instruction so that variability supports learning without lowering standards? What criteria can be used to level learning outcomes in a way that is observable, reliable, and pedagogically meaningful? How can these criteria be integrated into an instructional cycle that connects diagnosis, task design, support, feedback, and progression decisions?

This work employs a design-oriented research synthesis methodology. The aim is not to report a single intervention but to develop an implementable model grounded in established theory and empirical findings. The analysis draws on several complementary knowledge bases. Didactic theory contributes principles of alignment between goals, learning activities, and assessment evidence. Mastery learning and outcome-based education provide the logic of progression through levels of performance rather than through time spent. Formative assessment research clarifies how criteria-based feedback supports learning, especially when learners are given opportunities to revise and improve. Differentiated instruction scholarship informs how instructional variation can be managed without labeling, and how tasks can vary by complexity, scaffolding, and product demands while preserving common goals.

The model is constructed through a sequence of analytic steps. First, the concept of competence is operationalized as an integrated ability that includes knowledge, skills, strategies, and dispositions observable in performance. Second, leveling is defined as the specification of qualitatively different stages of performance development, not merely quantitative differences such as speed or amount. Third, criteria for leveling are derived as cross-cutting dimensions that can be applied to different competencies: conceptual understanding, procedural control, transfer and flexibility, communication and explanation, autonomy and self-regulation, and accuracy or quality standards appropriate to the domain. Fourth, the criteria are integrated into a methodological cycle that teachers can implement at the unit and lesson levels, linking diagnostic evidence to instructional decisions and progression.

To ensure practical feasibility, the model assumes typical classroom constraints such as limited time, mixed-ability groups, and the need for routine-based orchestration. For assessment, the framework is built around analytic rubrics and criterion-referenced decision rules, allowing teachers to evaluate growth and determine readiness for the next level. The model also includes guidance on evidence sufficiency: decisions about level attainment should be based on more than a single task, using multiple performances across contexts to increase validity.

The main result is a competency-based model for organizing differentiated instruction through leveled learning outcomes and explicit criteria. The model has two core elements: a leveling framework that defines what "progress" means in competence development, and an instructional cycle that uses the framework to plan and manage differentiation.

The leveling framework treats learning outcomes as performance descriptors that become progressively more complex, independent, and transferable. Leveling is not defined as a simple three-tier hierarchy of "easy–medium–hard." Instead, levels correspond to qualitative shifts in how learners use knowledge. At an initial level, performance is primarily reproductive: learners recognize, recall, or apply a taught procedure in familiar conditions with substantial support. At a developing level, performance becomes functional: learners apply knowledge and skills to solve typical problems, explain steps, and correct some errors using guidance and criteria. At an advanced level, performance becomes adaptive: learners transfer strategies to new contexts, justify choices, integrate multiple resources, and demonstrate autonomy in

planning, monitoring, and revising their work. These levels can be expanded into more granular sublevels depending on curriculum needs, but the essential requirement is that each level represents a qualitatively distinct form of competence.

The criteria for leveling learning outcomes are articulated as dimensions that make levels observable and assessable. Conceptual depth refers to how learners understand and use key ideas. At lower levels, understanding is often tied to surface features and memorized rules; at higher levels, learners connect concepts, distinguish cases, and explain reasons. Procedural control refers to the ability to carry out actions reliably. At lower levels, procedures require step-by-step prompts and frequent correction; at higher levels, procedures become automated and flexible. Transfer and flexibility refer to whether learners can apply competencies in unfamiliar tasks and combine them with other competencies. At lower levels, transfer is minimal; at higher levels, learners adapt strategies and select appropriate tools based on task demands. Communication and explanation refer to whether learners can express their reasoning and make their performance intelligible to others. At lower levels, explanations are fragmentary or imitative; at higher levels, learners justify decisions, use appropriate terminology, and consider audience needs. Autonomy and self-regulation refer to planning, monitoring, and revision. At lower levels, learners depend on external control; at higher levels, learners use criteria to self-check, seek feedback productively, and improve their work. Domain-specific quality standards refer to accuracy, fluency, coherence, or correctness depending on the subject, ensuring that leveling does not ignore essential norms such as spelling conventions, mathematical precision, or scientific reasoning.

These criteria become operational through performance indicators and evidence requirements. A competency descriptor is written in terms of what learners can do, under what conditions, and to what quality. Evidence is collected through tasks designed to elicit the targeted performance, and rubrics translate criteria into observable markers. For example, in language education, a leveled outcome for reading comprehension can be described through the complexity of texts, the depth of inference, and the ability to justify answers using textual evidence. In writing, leveling can be expressed through coherence of structure, lexical precision, grammatical control, and revision behavior. In mathematics, leveling can be expressed through problem representation, strategy selection, justification, and error analysis. The framework is therefore generalizable: it does not prescribe a single subject-specific rubric, but provides dimensions for constructing rubrics aligned to the domain.

The instructional cycle integrates leveling criteria into differentiated instruction through five linked phases. The first phase is diagnostic positioning, in which the teacher collects short evidence aligned to the target competency and interprets it using the leveling criteria. The goal is not to label learners globally but to position them relative to the specific competency being taught. The second phase is outcome-focused planning, where the teacher defines a common competency target for the unit and specifies what attainment looks like at each level, including acceptable evidence. The third phase is differentiated task design, where tasks are created to preserve conceptual alignment while varying scaffolding, complexity, and independence in ways consistent with the leveling criteria. Learners at earlier levels are given tasks that maintain the same conceptual goal but include supports such as prompts, worked examples, vocabulary banks, or structured templates; learners at higher levels receive tasks that demand greater transfer, explanation, and autonomy. The fourth phase is feedback and revision, where learners receive criterion-based feedback and are required, for selected tasks, to revise their work. Revision is treated as a key mechanism of competence development because it connects criteria to action and strengthens self-regulation. The fifth phase is progression decision-making, where the teacher determines whether learners have demonstrated stable performance at a level and are ready to work toward the next level. This decision is based on multiple pieces of evidence across tasks, reducing the risk of misclassification due to one-time performance fluctuations.

Within this model, flexible grouping becomes a practical tool rather than a structural division. Learners can work in mixed groups during exploration and meaning-making, and in targeted groups during short mini-lessons addressing specific needs revealed by diagnostics. Because levels are tied to competencies and evidence, groups can change across topics and over time. This flexibility supports equity and reduces stigmatization, while still allowing teachers to provide targeted instruction.

The proposed framework reframes differentiated instruction as a systematic didactic design grounded in competencies and progression criteria. This reframing

matters because many difficulties in differentiation arise from ambiguity: teachers know that learners differ, but lack stable rules for deciding what to vary and how to judge progress. Competency-based leveling introduces a shared language for these decisions. When levels are expressed through criteria such as conceptual depth, transfer, explanation, and autonomy, differentiation can move beyond "more or less of the same" toward qualitatively appropriate learning experiences.

A major advantage of competency-based leveling is its compatibility with equity. In non-criterion approaches, differentiation can become covert tracking because "low group" learners repeatedly receive simplified tasks that reduce access to rich learning. The leveling framework reduces this risk by insisting on goal unity and by defining supports as temporary scaffolds that enable learners to reach shared competencies. Importantly, leveling does not imply lowering standards; it clarifies the route to meeting them. Learners can be supported at an initial level without being confined there, because progression decisions are tied to evidence of growth.

The model also strengthens assessment validity. In traditional grading, performance is often aggregated into a single score that obscures what a learner can do and what they need next. Competency-based criteria-based assessment makes the structure of performance visible. This visibility supports learners' metacognition because they can understand what improvement entails. It also supports teacher collaboration and quality assurance because rubrics and descriptors provide common reference points. However, this benefit depends on careful rubric design. If rubrics are overly detailed, they can increase teacher workload and reduce usability; if they are too vague, they fail to guide feedback. The proposed criteria are intended as a balanced set that can be adapted with a manageable number of indicators.

Teacher workload remains a realistic concern. Differentiated instruction becomes unsustainable if it requires teachers to create entirely separate lessons for each level. The model addresses feasibility by emphasizing conceptual alignment and reusable scaffolding templates. When teachers design a core task and then adjust scaffolding, complexity, and independence, they can maintain a single lesson structure with variable pathways. Over time, banks of leveled tasks and rubric descriptors can be reused and refined, reducing preparation costs. The diagnostic positioning phase can also be lightweight, using short tasks embedded in instruction rather than extensive testing.

Another critical issue is the danger of reifying levels as fixed identities. Competency-based systems can unintentionally create new labels if levels are treated as permanent placements. The model therefore emphasizes competency-specific positioning and flexible grouping. A learner may be advanced in oral communication but developing in writing mechanics, and instruction should reflect that profile. Progression should be represented as a trajectory across competencies rather than as a single global status. This approach is consistent with inclusive education and with the understanding that development is uneven and context-dependent.

The framework is especially relevant for language and literacy in primary education because early differences in language experience can quickly translate into achievement gaps. Competency-based leveling allows teachers to define what "reading comprehension" or "writing competence" looks like at successive stages, including the role of vocabulary, inference, coherence, and revision. It also supports formative feedback practices, which are essential for literacy development. When learners revise texts or reread with a new purpose, they engage in the kinds of self-regulatory behaviors that distinguish higher competence levels.

The limitations of the present work stem from its design-synthesis nature. The model is theoretically grounded and practically oriented, but it requires empirical validation in real classrooms, including studies that measure learning gains, motivational outcomes, and equity effects. Future research should examine how different criteria weights affect teacher decisions, how learners perceive leveling, and how progression rules can be standardized while remaining sensitive to context. Longitudinal studies are particularly important for assessing whether competency-based differentiation reduces long-term inequality in achievement.

A competency-based approach can make differentiated instruction more coherent, equitable, and instructionally effective by providing transparent criteria for leveling learning outcomes and by linking differentiation to evidence-based progression. This article proposed a leveling framework defined by qualitative shifts in competence development and specified criteria that make these shifts observable: conceptual depth, procedural

control, transfer, communication and explanation, autonomy and self-regulation, and domain-specific quality standards. On this basis, a methodological cycle was developed connecting diagnostic positioning, outcome-focused planning, differentiated task design, feedback with revision, and progression decision-making. The model shifts attention from fixed learner categories to growth trajectories within specific competencies, enabling flexible grouping and criterion-based assessment. Implemented thoughtfully, competency-based leveling can strengthen both learning outcomes and classroom inclusion by ensuring that all learners work toward shared competencies through pathways adapted to their current needs.

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