

# Didactic Principles and A Methodological Model of Differentiated Instruction in Primary School Mother Tongue Lessons

Rasulova Nozigul

Chief Specialist of the Education Quality Control Department at Andijan Regional Pedagogical Skills Center, Uzbekistan

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**Abstract:** Differentiated instruction has become a central response to learner diversity in primary education, particularly in mother tongue lessons where children develop foundational literacy, vocabulary, and text competence at noticeably different rates. Yet in many classrooms differentiation is reduced to occasional “extra tasks” for fast learners or simplified work for struggling pupils, without a coherent didactic rationale, systematic diagnostics, or transparent assessment logic. This article proposes a set of didactic principles and a methodological model for differentiated instruction in primary school mother tongue lessons. The proposed model treats differentiation as a planned variability of learning paths that preserves common curricular goals while adapting the content, process, and product of learning to pupils’ readiness, language experience, and learning profiles. The results are presented as (1) a principled framework that prevents arbitrary “streaming” and protects equity; (2) a model architecture with functional blocks and a weekly/lesson-level cycle; and (3) practical indicators for monitoring literacy growth and communicative development. The discussion clarifies how differentiation can remain academically rigorous, developmentally appropriate, and manageable for teachers through stable routines, criterion-based assessment, and scaffolding that gradually fades. The article concludes that effective differentiation in mother tongue lessons is achieved when pedagogical decisions are evidence-informed, tasks are variably demanding but conceptually aligned, and feedback is oriented toward growth rather than labeling.

**Keywords:** Differentiated instruction, primary school, mother tongue teaching, didactic principles, methodological model, literacy development, scaffolding, formative assessment, inclusive education.

**Introduction:** Primary school mother tongue lessons occupy a unique position in the curriculum because they simultaneously shape language as a tool of thought, communication, and social participation. In early grades, children learn to decode and comprehend texts, build vocabulary, master basic grammar and spelling conventions, and begin composing coherent written statements. These achievements form the basis for future learning across all subjects, since reading comprehension and language-mediated reasoning are prerequisites for academic success. At the same time, primary classrooms are intrinsically heterogeneous. Pupils enter school with different home language experiences, varying exposure to books and storytelling,

unequal development of phonological awareness, and diverse socio-cultural practices of communication. Even within one class, some children may read fluently and write extended texts, while others are still stabilizing letter–sound correspondences or struggle to understand instructions. This diversity is normal rather than exceptional, and it grows further when classrooms include multilingual learners, children with special educational needs, or pupils who have experienced interrupted schooling.

The didactic challenge is therefore to preserve a shared learning goal—common language standards and a common cultural-linguistic foundation—while ensuring that all pupils can progress from their current level.

Differentiated instruction addresses this challenge by adapting teaching to learners' readiness, interests, and learning profiles without lowering expectations for anyone. In the context of mother tongue education, differentiation is not an optional enrichment strategy; it is a necessity for preventing the widening of literacy gaps. When instruction is uniform, stronger pupils may plateau because tasks are not cognitively demanding, while struggling pupils can accumulate failure experiences that reduce motivation and self-efficacy. Over time, these dynamics produce stable inequalities that become difficult to remediate.

Despite the conceptual appeal of differentiation, its implementation often remains superficial. Teachers may equate differentiation with dividing the class into "strong" and "weak" groups and assigning different quantities of similar exercises. Such approaches can unintentionally label pupils, reduce peer learning, and neglect deep language development. Another common problem is fragmentation: differentiated tasks are created ad hoc, without a diagnostic basis, explicit criteria, or a clear link to lesson objectives. Teachers then experience differentiation as time-consuming and unsustainable. These difficulties suggest that differentiation requires an explicit methodological model grounded in didactic principles, rather than a collection of isolated techniques.

This article aims to articulate didactic principles and propose a methodological model for differentiated instruction in primary school mother tongue lessons. The guiding questions are: Which didactic principles should regulate differentiation so that variability serves learning while preserving equity and common goals? How can these principles be operationalized in a coherent model that links diagnosis, planning, instruction, support, and assessment? Which indicators allow teachers to evaluate effectiveness in terms of both learning outcomes and learning processes? By addressing these questions, the paper provides a research-informed foundation for designing instruction that is simultaneously inclusive, rigorous, and practical.

The article uses a design-oriented research synthesis methodology appropriate for developing instructional models. The first methodological step is conceptual analysis of major educational theories relevant to differentiation in primary education and language learning. These include sociocultural perspectives on

learning and scaffolding, mastery learning and criterion-based progression, theories of cognitive load and developmental appropriateness, and formative assessment frameworks that connect feedback to learning gains. Language pedagogy literature is considered to identify mechanisms of literacy development, such as the gradual automatization of decoding, growth of vocabulary breadth and depth, development of grammatical awareness, and the transition from sentence-level control to text-level coherence.

The second step is model construction. Differentiation is treated as a system of decisions rather than a set of isolated practices. The model is built around a recurring instructional cycle that begins with diagnosis of pupils' current state, proceeds through planned variation of tasks and supports, and ends with evidence-based evaluation and adjustment. In constructing the model, the analysis distinguishes between variability that changes the learning goal (which risks lowering standards) and variability that changes pathways toward the same goal (which preserves equity). The model also incorporates classroom management constraints typical for primary teachers, including limited lesson time, mixed-ability group work, and the need for routine-based organization.

The third step derives evaluation indicators. Because mother tongue lessons include multiple interrelated competencies, the evaluation framework covers outcomes (reading accuracy and fluency, comprehension, spelling, grammar use, written coherence, oral participation) and processes (engagement, persistence, revision behavior, peer interaction, uptake of feedback). Indicators are formulated so they can be assessed through classroom observation, short diagnostic tasks, rubric-based evaluation of pupil work, and progress tracking across time. The article does not present invented experimental statistics; instead, it provides a model and an evaluation logic that can be used for future empirical validation.

The synthesis yielded two interlinked results: a system of didactic principles governing differentiation in primary mother tongue lessons and a methodological model that operationalizes those principles in classroom practice.

The first result is a principled framework. The principle of goal unity and pathway variability states that all pupils work toward shared curricular outcomes, while tasks and supports vary in complexity, amount of guidance, and form of response. This principle protects against the common error of assigning fundamentally different learning goals to different groups, which can institutionalize low expectations. In mother tongue lessons, goal unity may mean that all pupils learn to extract the main idea of a text, but some receive additional scaffolds such as structured prompts, vocabulary support, or shorter text segments that gradually expand.

The principle of developmental appropriateness requires that differentiated tasks align with children's cognitive and linguistic development. In primary grades, language learning relies on concrete examples, repeated exposure, and gradual abstraction. Differentiation should therefore not be achieved by simply giving younger pupils "harder grammar" or more rules; rather, cognitive challenge should be embedded in meaningful language use, such as comparing sentence meanings, justifying word choices in context, or explaining why punctuation changes interpretation. Developmental appropriateness also implies that instruction balances automation (needed for decoding and spelling) with meaning-making (needed for comprehension and expression).

The principle of diagnostic grounding requires that differentiation begins with evidence, not intuition alone. Diagnostics in mother tongue education should be frequent and lightweight, capturing the specific barrier a pupil faces. For instance, low comprehension may be caused by limited vocabulary, weak inference skills, or difficulties maintaining attention across text, and each requires different supports. Diagnostic grounding helps teachers avoid overgeneral labels such as "weak reader" and instead plan targeted scaffolding.

The principle of scaffolding and gradual release frames differentiation as temporary support rather than permanent categorization. Pupils receive prompts, models, sentence starters, or guided practice when needed, but these supports fade as competence grows. In literacy development, fading can be visible in reduced reliance on phonetic prompts, increased independence in editing, or transition from guided retellings to original summaries. This principle prevents learned helplessness

and maintains the expectation of independent performance.

The principle of meaningful activity and communicative orientation emphasizes that mother tongue lessons are not only about correct forms but about purposeful language use. Differentiation should thus preserve communicative authenticity. Even when pupils work at different levels of complexity, tasks should involve conveying meaning to an audience, discussing text ideas, or expressing personal viewpoints, not only filling blanks. Communicative orientation also supports motivation, since pupils see language as a tool for expression rather than a set of constraints.

The principle of equity and inclusion requires that differentiation expands participation rather than isolating pupils. Grouping should be flexible, with opportunities for mixed-ability collaboration where pupils can learn from peers, while also providing moments of targeted instruction for those who need it. Equity also requires careful attention to classroom discourse: pupils should not be publicly labeled by level, and success criteria should be transparent and attainable through effort and support.

The principle of formative assessment and feedback integration states that differentiation is sustained through ongoing feedback that informs both teacher decisions and pupil self-regulation. In mother tongue lessons, formative assessment includes not only quizzes but also feedback on oral responses, reading strategies, and writing drafts. The most important feature is that feedback leads to action: pupils revise, reread with a new purpose, or apply a rule in a new context.

The second result is a methodological model that operationalizes these principles. The model is structured as an instructional cycle with interconnected blocks: diagnostic-analytical, design-planning, differentiated instruction, and evaluation-reflection. At the diagnostic-analytical stage, the teacher collects evidence from short tasks aligned with the lesson's core objective. For reading comprehension, this may be a brief text with a few questions that reveal whether pupils can locate explicit information, infer meaning, or interpret a word in context. For spelling and grammar, the diagnostic may reveal whether errors are rule-based, attentional, or caused by weak morphological awareness. The teacher also identifies pupils' current

readiness profiles for that objective, not as fixed categories but as working hypotheses for planning.

At the design-planning stage, the teacher constructs a common lesson objective and plans task variants that maintain conceptual alignment. Variation can occur through the amount of scaffolding, the complexity of language material, the degree of independence, and the expected product format. In a text-based lesson, one pupil group may work with a shorter or segmented version of the same text, supported by a glossary and guiding questions, while another group works with the full text and produces a synthesis or interpretation. The critical point is that all tasks relate to the same core idea and develop the same competency, even if the pathway differs.

At the differentiated instruction stage, the lesson unfolds through a shared introductory phase followed by structured variability. The shared phase establishes meaning, activates prior knowledge, and introduces success criteria in child-friendly language. Differentiated work then proceeds through flexible grouping and teacher orchestration. The teacher may provide a short targeted mini-lesson to a subgroup based on diagnosed needs, while other pupils engage in independent or collaborative work. Scaffolding is integrated into materials and interaction, for example through sentence frames that support retelling, prompts that guide inference, or editing checklists for writing. Importantly, the model emphasizes that differentiation is not only about assigning different tasks; it is also about differentiating the processes of support, such as the frequency of teacher check-ins, the type of feedback provided, and the structure of peer interaction.

At the evaluation-reflection stage, pupils demonstrate learning through a brief common performance aligned with the lesson objective, enabling the teacher to compare progress across pathways. This performance can be a short oral explanation, a written response, or an applied spelling task. The teacher uses a criterion-based approach: the focus is on whether the competency has improved relative to the success criteria, not on ranking pupils. Reflection includes pupil awareness of strategies used, such as how they found the main idea or how they checked spelling. The teacher then uses the evidence to adjust subsequent instruction, deciding which scaffolds can be faded and

which competencies need further reinforcement.

The model's coherence lies in the continuous linkage among diagnosis, differentiated task design, scaffolding, and assessment evidence. Differentiation is therefore not an occasional event but a stable pedagogical system embedded in routine lesson structures.

The proposed principles and model address the central implementation dilemma in differentiated instruction: how to provide variability without sacrificing unity and fairness. In primary mother tongue lessons, the risk of inequitable differentiation is especially high because literacy skills are cumulative; early gaps can quickly become persistent disadvantages. When teachers assign easier tasks repeatedly to certain pupils, they may inadvertently limit those pupils' access to rich language and complex text structures, slowing development further. The principle of goal unity and pathway variability counters this by requiring that all pupils engage with core disciplinary ideas and language functions, even when supports differ. This aligns with inclusive education approaches that treat access to meaningful content as a right rather than a privilege.

The model also clarifies why differentiation must begin with diagnostic specificity. Language difficulties can look similar in surface behavior but arise from different mechanisms. A child who reads slowly may lack decoding automaticity, may struggle with attention, or may not recognize word patterns; each requires a different form of support. Without diagnosis, teachers often compensate by lowering text complexity or reducing task demands, which can decrease learning opportunities. With diagnosis, teachers can instead target the barrier while keeping the intellectual and communicative goal intact. Over time, this approach supports both achievement and motivation because pupils experience progress tied to specific strategies.

Another important aspect is the relationship between differentiation and classroom discourse. Mother tongue lessons are interaction-rich: pupils talk about texts, explain reasoning, and share written ideas. Differentiation should therefore be visible as supportive structure rather than as labeling. If pupils perceive differentiation as a marker of status, motivation and participation can decline. The equity principle in the proposed framework implies that grouping must be

flexible and that success criteria must be shared. Pupils should understand that different supports reflect different current needs, not different human worth or fixed ability. This is consistent with growth-oriented pedagogies that emphasize learning as developable through effort, strategy, and support.

The model emphasizes scaffolding and gradual release because primary learners require guided participation to develop independence. In literacy education, scaffolding can take many forms, such as modeling how to infer meaning from context, demonstrating how to revise a sentence for clarity, or providing a structure for retelling. The critical requirement is fading: supports should reduce over time to prevent dependence. The evaluation-reflection stage is essential here because it provides evidence that a scaffold is no longer needed or that it must be redesigned. This feedback loop makes differentiation manageable; teachers do not need to invent new systems each lesson, but can refine a stable cycle.

From a practical standpoint, teachers often worry that differentiation increases workload. The model addresses feasibility by focusing on conceptual alignment and routine. When teachers design task variants that share a common core, they can reuse materials and adjust them incrementally, rather than creating entirely separate lessons. Moreover, diagnostic tasks can be short and embedded in learning, functioning as both practice and assessment. Over time, teachers can build a repertoire of scaffold templates, such as inference prompts, vocabulary supports, and writing frames, which can be applied across topics. This approach transforms differentiation from an occasional “special effort” into a predictable design habit.

The model also suggests a more nuanced understanding of “level.” In mother tongue education, a pupil may be strong in oral expression but weak in spelling, or fluent in reading but weak in inference. Differentiation based on a single global label is therefore pedagogically inaccurate. The diagnostic-analytical stage encourages teachers to define readiness relative to a specific objective, allowing a pupil to receive support in one domain while contributing strength in another. This improves both learning and classroom social dynamics by enabling reciprocal peer support.

Limitations remain. The model is based on synthesis and

design logic rather than a single controlled experiment. Its effectiveness must be validated empirically in different contexts, including monolingual and multilingual settings, rural and urban schools, and classrooms with varying resource constraints. Future studies should examine not only achievement outcomes, but also process measures such as participation equity, pupils’ strategic awareness, and teacher workload. Particularly valuable would be longitudinal research that tracks whether early differentiated instruction reduces later literacy gaps and supports sustained academic confidence.

Differentiated instruction in primary school mother tongue lessons is most effective when it is governed by clear didactic principles and implemented through a coherent methodological model rather than isolated techniques. This article proposed a principled framework emphasizing goal unity with pathway variability, developmental appropriateness, diagnostic grounding, scaffolding with gradual release, communicative orientation, equity, and formative feedback integration. On this basis, a cyclical model was developed that links diagnosis, differentiated task design, supported instruction, and criterion-based evaluation-reflection. The model aims to preserve shared educational standards while ensuring that every pupil can progress from their current level through appropriate supports and meaningful language activity. In contemporary primary education, where learner diversity is the norm, such a structured approach to differentiation offers a practical and ethically grounded pathway to improving literacy outcomes and fostering inclusive classroom communities.

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