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Original Article

### Rethinking Baseline Teaching: Addressing Implementation Variability in Tanzanian Secondary Schools

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Proficiency.

The current study aimed to examine Baseline Teaching (BT) in Tanzanian secondary schools, focusing on identifying the sources of variability in instructional duration, assessment practices, and content structure, and exploring how these variations impact students' language proficiency and academic performance. A systematic literature review was employed to gather and analyse relevant themes. The significant inconsistencies in this study were found particularly in the subjects taught, with some schools focusing solely on English language skills, while others adopted a multi-subject approach. Variations in the BT duration were also observed, with some schools implementing the BT for as few as two weeks, deviating from the recommended six-week period. Furthermore, assessment practices were highly varied; some schools conducted diagnostic and summative evaluations, while others relied solely on end-of-course assessments. Supervision and coordination were often weak and inconsistent, with many schools lacking formal appointments and adherence to national directives. The study concludes that these disparities destabilise the effectiveness of the BT. The study further recommends the development of a standardised and extended Baseline Course, standardised assessment methods and practices, formalised coordination, and stronger supervision to promote equity and improved learning outcomes across all secondary schools in Tanzania.

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**INTRODUCTION**

In Tanzania, the transition from primary to secondary education presents significant challenges for students, particularly regarding language proficiency and academic readiness. While primary education is primarily delivered in Kiswahili, secondary education adopts English as the medium of instruction. This abrupt linguistic shift often hinders students' comprehension and engagement with subject content, reducing academic performance and increasing dropout rates (Yohana & Mwila, 2022). To address these concerns, the Tanzanian Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, in collaboration with various educational stakeholders, introduced Baseline Teaching (BT) (commonly referred to as Baseline Orientation Course - BOC) (MOEVT, 2015).

The BT is a foundational instructional strategy to equip Form One students with essential English language skills encompassing listening, speaking, reading, and writing alongside basic concepts from key subjects such as Languages, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies. Typically implemented during the initial weeks of secondary school, the course seeks to build learners' confidence, enhance communication abilities, and foster academic preparedness for English-medium instruction (TIE, 2014). As a result, BT is recognised as a strategic intervention to promote educational equity and improve the quality of learning outcomes across Tanzania's secondary education system (URT, 2023).

In supporting students' transition to English-medium instruction, the Tanzanian government emphasised the importance of BT through the issuance of a curriculum implementation calendar for lower-level secondary schools. This calendar recommends BT to all subjects before beginning the syllabus, thereby offering students foundational

exposure to academic content in English (URT, 2022). This initiative aligns with the Tanzania Education and Training Policy, which underscores that a strong command of English is essential for effective communication and the acquisition of education, skills, and knowledge among students (URT, 2023).

Furthermore, the 2014 Education and Training Policy reaffirms the government's commitment to strengthening the use of English across all educational levels, particularly in secondary education, where it serves as the primary language of instruction (URT, 2023). These policy directives not only acclaim the strategic importance of English language proficiency for educational attainment but also reinforce the central role of BT as a bridge between primary education in Kiswahili and secondary education in English.

Despite clear policy intentions, BT in Tanzanian secondary schools remains inconsistent as studies reveal significant gaps between the BT framework and classroom practice, with variations in instructional duration, assessment methods, and pedagogical focus (Azaria, 2023; Mbwambo, 2021; Faustin, 2014; Murasi, 2013). Furthermore, language-related challenges persist, limiting students' comprehension and performance even within BT-supported settings (Yohana & Mwila, 2022). These discrepancies underscore the need for a systematic review to evaluate deviations from policy and develop strategies for more effective and context-responsive implementation. This paper undertakes such a review, contributing to the broader discourse on educational reform and language transition in Tanzania.

**Statement of the Problem**

Despite the Tanzanian government's efforts to enhance secondary education through the

implementation of Baseline Teaching (BT), a persistent gap exists between the prescribed policy guidelines and actual classroom practices. Empirical evidence reveals that BT is not fully aligned with its implementation frameworks, resulting in notable inconsistencies across studied schools in aspects such as duration, assessment practice, supervision, and academic subject focus (Mbwambo, 2021; Faustin, 2014; Murasi, 2013). These incongruities potentially compromise BT's ability to equip students with the necessary English language proficiency and, consequently, academic success. Furthermore, ongoing language-related challenges continue to hinder students' comprehension and engagement with lesson content despite the BT (Yohana & Mwila, 2022).

These challenges underscore the urgent need for a critical review and rethinking of BT strategies across secondary schools in Tanzania. Therefore, the current study aims to examine the BT in Tanzanian secondary schools, with a focus on identifying the sources of variability in duration, assessment practices, and content structure and focus, and to explore how these variations affect students' English language proficiency and academic performance. The study was guided by three questions. What key factors contribute to variability in the BT across schools? How do the BT variations affect students' English proficiency and academic performance? And what strategies can be adopted to enhance the consistency of BT in Tanzania?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study holds considerable significance across multiple dimensions. From a policy perspective, its findings will provide valuable insights for education policymakers and curriculum designers, highlighting specific areas that require improvement in both the content and overall facilitation methodology of the Baseline course for Form One students in Tanzania. Academically, the study contributes to the limited body of literature on

curriculum implementation and language proficiency within the Tanzanian context, thereby filling a critical knowledge gap. Practically, it offers evidence-based recommendations aimed at enhancing instructional practices, teacher training, and assessment methods related to BT delivery. Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of ongoing professional development for teachers, emphasising the need for effective training and support to ensure that educators are well-equipped to deliver BT in alignment with guidelines. Lastly, by revealing variations, the study provides empirical evidence that can guide future curriculum reforms, promoting greater coherence between framework statements and practice.

### **MATERIALS METHODS**

This study employed a systematic literature review as the primary research method. A SLR is a structured and rigorous approach to synthesising scientific evidence, aimed at answering a specific research question in a transparent, reproducible, and comprehensive manner (Lame, 2019). It seeks to incorporate all relevant published studies on a given topic while critically appraising the quality of the evidence. In this study, the SLR was used to critically examine the Baseline Teaching (BT) in Tanzanian secondary schools. Relevant studies were systematically identified, screened, and selected based on predefined inclusion criteria. Only studies specifically related to BT in the Tanzanian context were considered. A total of five documents, including four dissertations and one article published in English and sourced from University repositories and reputable academic journals, respectively, were purposively sampled for review.

The review focused on key implementation variables, namely: instructional duration, assessment practices, content focus, and supervision as outlined in the baseline guiding documents. The literature review process was conducted between October 2024 and April 2025. The recurring themes were identified across the selected studies, followed

by a qualitative critical analysis and interpretation of the findings. On ethical considerations, since this study did not involve human participants or require ethical clearance. However, all reviewed documents were properly cited to maintain academic integrity and avoid plagiarism.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The Baseline Teaching Content Focus**

The study by Faustin (2014) revealed differences in the subjects taught during the Baseline Teaching (BT) across Catholic Schools X and Y. In Catholic School X, the BT focused exclusively on English language skills. Teachers and students confirmed that the curriculum emphasised the four core skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, along with English grammar. In contrast, Catholic School Y used the BT material developed by the Ministry of Education and Culture. This material integrates topics from language, social sciences, mathematics, and sciences (e.g., English, History, Biology, Geography, Chemistry, and Physics). The BT coordinator and students noted that lessons included vocabulary and content across these subjects, such as greetings, speeches, time, shopping, and scientific terms. These findings show that School X focused solely on English, while School Y implemented a multi-subject approach using the national Baseline manual to introduce students to various secondary school subjects.

Mbwambo (2021) highlights significant variations in the subjects taught during the BT, largely influenced by school ownership and institutional priorities. While some religious schools, such as Schools X and Y, incorporated subjects like Bible Knowledge and Latin, others adhered strictly to the baseline curriculum provided by the Ministry of Education, focusing on eight core subjects including social sciences: Civics, history, geography; sciences: physics, chemistry and biology; mathematics and English. These variations suggest a lack of standardisation that may lead to unequal learning experiences among students.

Thus, schools with more autonomy tend to offer broader subject coverage, potentially giving their students an advantage in transitioning to secondary education. Meanwhile, one of the schools excluded subjects like Agriculture and business subjects simply because they are not part of the BT package, which may limit students' exposure to practical knowledge of those subjects. The findings call for the development of a more inclusive and standardised BT framework. While flexibility is important, clearer guidelines are needed to ensure all students receive equitable and comprehensive preparation for secondary education.

Murasi (2013) shows distinct approaches by BT subjects across schools. In the most successful schools, the BT was collaboratively delivered by subject-specific teachers using the Baseline manual, aiming to develop students' academic language relevant to various prescribed subjects. Conversely, in less successful schools, only the English language subject was taught, driven by the belief that the BT's purpose was solely to enhance English language subject proficiency. This narrow view overlooked the value of learning instructional language subject-specific vocabulary and restricted the contributions of other subjects' teachers. Murasi's findings suggest that teaching all subjects during the BT enhances the academic relevance, eventually fostering smoother transitions into secondary education.

### **The Baseline Teaching Duration**

Mbwambo (2021) found significant variation in the duration of the BT across secondary schools. While some schools implemented the BT for the recommended six weeks, others shortened it to two or four weeks. For instance, School B completed the BT in two weeks, with the head stating that two weeks is enough for BT, then starting to teach the syllabus contents. Conversely, School A extended it to four weeks due to late student reporting. Schools X and Y followed the six-week guideline, with School Y beginning the BT as early as December to



accommodate early interviews and student preparation. Despite these efforts, discrepancies in implementation were evident. Only two of the four schools studied adhered to the six-week guideline.

School Quality Assurance Officers confirmed that the government mandates a full six-week BT, starting from the first day of the school term. However, late student arrivals and scheduling pressures led some schools to shorten the BT, potentially compromising its effectiveness. Similar variations in duration were also reported in earlier studies by Murasi (2013) and Fustin (2014), who also found significant variation in the duration of similar BT in Dodoma Municipality. These studies reported durations ranging from four weeks to as long as one year, depending on the specific school context and administrative discretion.

An analysis of the findings indicates that only 50% of the schools examined adhered fully to the Form One Orientation Program (FOP) implementation guidelines, while the remaining schools deviated from the prescribed duration. Mbwapbo (2021) emphasises that such inconsistencies in the BT may negatively affect students' acquisition of foundational skills, particularly in English. He further advocates for comprehensive stakeholder engagement to promote adherence to established guidelines and enhance program effectiveness. In alignment with this perspective, Azaria (2023) recommended that to improve the outcomes of the BT, the government should revise the existing implementation guidelines and extend the program duration from six weeks to a minimum of four months.

Similarly, Yohana and Mwila (2022) conducted a study in Kinondoni Municipality, revealing that the six-week duration allocated for the BT, as stipulated by the Tanzania Institute of Education (2014), was insufficient. Teachers reported that many new students entered secondary school with limited English proficiency, making the transition from Kiswahili to English as the medium of instruction particularly challenging. Consequently, teachers

advocated for extending the BT to one year, providing students with ample time to develop the necessary language skills for effective learning. The study concluded that the current one-month period is inadequate for achieving the intended linguistic and educational outcomes.

### **The Baseline Teaching Students' Assessment**

Mbwambo (2021) reported that all schools studied (A, B, X, and Y) assessed students during the BT, though methods varied. Common assessment practices included oral and written tests, weekly quizzes, and summative tests, with items developed by subject teachers. School X employed both formative and summative assessments, while School Y focused solely on formative assessments through weekly and monthly tests. School A conducted only one end-of-BT test. In contrast, School B compiled test items from all subject teachers into a single comprehensive exam, marked collaboratively by a team of teachers. Additionally, Schools X and Y conducted entrance interviews to screen students, unlike Schools A and B.

However, there was no evidence of established assessment practices. Neither assessment instruments nor evaluation reports were available, making it challenging to make evidence-based judgments regarding students' progress and the effectiveness of the BT. The lack of proper documentation of student progress indicates weaknesses in the BT. One School Quality Assurance Officer recommended the inclusion of two key assessments: a diagnostic test at the beginning of the BT to identify learners' language needs, and a summative test at the end to evaluate learning outcomes (Mbwapbo, 2021). In line with this, the Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE, 2014) emphasises that BT assessment should incorporate continuous assessment methods, including observation, task-based, and peer assessments.

Murasi (2013) reported that assessment practices during the BT varied significantly between model schools, such as in successful and less successful

schools. In successful schools, both pre-test and post-test assessments were employed using the English Language Proficiency Test developed by the English Language Teaching Support Project (ELTSP). The pre-test helped diagnose learners' language needs, while the post-test measured the learning achieved during the BT. This dual-assessment approach enabled teachers to provide targeted support and evaluate the effectiveness of the BT.

In contrast, less successful schools relied solely on a teacher-made summative test administered at the end of the BT. Teachers submitted questions to the course coordinator, who compiled them into one examination. However, the absence of an entry assessment limited the teachers' ability to identify students' language challenges and track their progress. As a result, the assessment served only to evaluate outcomes, rather than informing instructional planning or measuring improvement over time. Murasi concluded that the limited assessment approach in less successful schools hindered the comprehensive evaluation of the BT impact on student language proficiency.

Faustin (2014) found that both Catholic Schools X and Y employed pre- and post-tests to assess the effectiveness of the BT. In School X, a 70-item test was administered before and after the BT, and results were submitted to the Regional Education Officer. Additionally, teachers provided feedback based on classroom observations, noting improved student comprehension when English was used as the medium of instruction after the course. Similarly, in School Y, both pre- and post-tests were used. The municipality had introduced a standardised BT test for all schools in the area. This test was also administered to students in School Y. The aim of using both tests was to evaluate learners' English proficiency before and after the BT to determine progress. However, teachers expressed concerns that the regional test was too easy and did not adequately reflect the learning levels of their

students, compared to teacher-made tests that were personalised to learners' abilities.

### **The Baseline Teaching Supervision**

Murasi (2013) emphasises the crucial role of supervision and follow-up in the success of the TB. Teachers in less successful schools noted inadequate supervision, with some failing to attend scheduled lessons. They suggested that the BT coordinator should ensure adherence to the timetable, stressing the need for better accountability. The study found that weak in-school supervision contributed to inefficiencies in less successful schools. In contrast, most successful schools showed better internal supervision. The BT coordinator emphasised the importance of school inspectors' involvement in monitoring and providing feedback to improve teaching. Teachers from both schools agreed that effective BT requires a mix of internal and external supervision. While successful schools had more effective internal supervision, less successful schools needed to improve both internal and external support. This finding underscores the need for a collaborative supervisory model for greater BT effectiveness.

In a study conducted in Ilemela Municipality, Azaria (2023) identified significant weaknesses in the supervision of the BT program, highlighting a lack of adequate follow-up and oversight. Document analysis revealed that only one school (20%) had formally appointed an FBO coordinator per the Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE) guidelines (2014), while the majority, four schools (80%) did not adhere to this requirement. Interview data further indicated differences in the assignment of coordinators: two schools (40%) had delegated the role to the Academic Master/Mistress, another two (40%) to heads of the English department, while one school (20%) did not specify an appointee to coordinate BT. Notably, most of these appointments were informal and lacked official documentation, contravening established policy

guidelines which emphasise formal designation for effective supervision.

These findings reveal a significant weakness in the operationalisation of the BT program's supervisory mechanisms. Although some Heads of Schools delegated the coordination role, the absence of formal appointments reflects a broader pattern of non-compliance with national guidelines. This informal approach not only undermines the integrity and effectiveness of the program but also exposes systemic gaps in accountability and adherence to established standards. Furthermore, the capacity of the Quality Assurance unit at all levels to effectively monitor the BT program requires critical examination, as the unit lacks adequate resources, training, and structural support to fulfil its mandate. These limitations call for a comprehensive review and strengthening of the BT supervision and monitoring framework to ensure its long-term effectiveness and sustainability.

The study conducted by Mbwambo (2021) showed discrepancies in the coordination and supervision of the BT across different schools, highlighting a lack of consistency in its implementation. In School Y and School X, the OP was supervised by the dean of studies and discipline offices, respectively, diverging from the guidelines set by the TIE (2014), which recommends that BT coordination should lie with a teacher from the English department under the supervision of the head of school. In contrast, Schools A and B adhered more closely to the guidelines by assigning BT coordination to the academic office, with additional support from the head of the English department. This inconsistency suggests a systemic issue in enforcing the BT framework, raising concerns about the effectiveness and standardisation of its delivery. The findings underline the need for stronger supervision and monitoring, clearer enforcement mechanisms, and enhanced professional accountability to ensure uniformity and the intended outcomes of the BT across schools.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

### Conclusion

This study concludes that variations in content focus, program duration, assessment methods, and supervisory practices compromise the directives of the BT framework. Disparities in content delivery in the BT, ranging from exclusive English subject instruction to integrated multi-subject approaches, reflect institutional discretion influenced by school ownership and priorities. The inconsistent BT durations, often shortened due to administrative constraints or late enrolment, limit targeted learners' opportunities for equitable transition for sustained intended skill development. Assessment practices vary widely, with some schools employing comprehensive diagnostic tools while others rely solely on terminal tests, hindering effective student progress monitoring and evaluation of the overall BT success. Additionally, poor supervision and coordination, including the absence of formally appointed coordinators, deteriorate the BT.

These findings indicate a systemic failure to enforce national education frameworks and guidelines, hence challenging the integrity of the BT initiative. Addressing these implementation gaps through standardised policies, strengthened institutional accountability, and enhanced monitoring and evaluation is essential to ensure equitable and comprehensive BT, ensuring readiness for all students transitioning into secondary education in Tanzania.

### Recommendations

- To develop and implement a standardised Baseline Teaching (BT). This would enhance the effectiveness and equity of the BT across Tanzanian secondary schools. This is within the mandate of the Ministry of Education in collaboration with the Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE) and other stakeholders. This curriculum should integrate English language proficiency with foundational content from core

secondary school subjects, ensuring consistent content delivery for equitable learning opportunities to all Tanzania's students.

- Reconsidering the current six-week duration of the BT is also essential. Extending the program to a minimum of three to twelve months would allow for comprehensive subject coverage, improved student engagement, and thorough development of language and academic skills. Clear implementation timelines and enforcement strategies should accompany this extension to maintain consistency in the BT.
- Assessment practices within the BT require significant enhancement. Implementing standardised pre- and post-BT assessments across all schools will accurately identify students' initial competencies and measure their progress. Additionally, incorporating continuous assessment methods, such as quizzes, observations, oral assessments, and peer evaluations, will provide a comprehensive understanding of student development and program effectiveness.
- Strengthening supervision and coordination is critical for a successful BT. Schools should formally appoint BT coordinators per TIE guidelines, ensuring effective internal supervision. This should be complemented by active external oversight from school quality assurance offices, with adequate resources and training provided to supervisory personnel.
- Providing continuous professional development opportunities for teachers, the BT coordinators, and school administrators is vital. Training should focus on the objectives of the BT, effective instructional strategies, inclusive assessment techniques, and proper coordination practices. Establishing a national monitoring and evaluation framework will further support regular assessment and continuous improvement of the BT.

- Finally, the recommendation for further studies. It is recommended that a comprehensive study be undertaken across Tanzania secondary schools, employing diverse methodological approaches to deepen and broaden the existing body of empirical knowledge. Such a study would provide more comprehensive insights into the overall nature of the BT, especially considering that preceding studies have been limited to specific regions within the country.

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