

# Challenges Associated with the Content of the Art History Component in the General Knowledge in Art Subject: Implications for Art History Education in West Africa

Dickson Adom\* Dr. Steve Kquofi Dr. Joe Adu Agyem

Department of General Art Studies, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, University Post Office, Kumasi, Ghana

## Abstract

The content of the Art History component in the General Knowledge in Art subject studied by various Senior High Schools in West Africa is largely of foreign art histories at the expense of the histories of African indigenous arts which are shallowly presented in the teaching syllabus to be taught students. This makes the students appreciate more of the artistic cultural heritage of foreign countries making them handicapped in the historical knowledge concerning their own rich African indigenous arts that identifies them as a people. Adentwi (2005) concurs that the content of an area of study must help learners to develop skills, values, norms, and attitudes that are considered peculiar to the society of the learner. A critical analysis of the content of the General Knowledge in Art subject proves contrary. There was therefore the urgency and utmost relevance to carry out a research to ascertain reasons why the content of the art history component of the General Knowledge in Art subject is foreign biased and advise on how there can be a balance of it with the African indigenous art histories in the General Knowledge in Art. The researcher gathered data from primary and secondary sources by way of interviews, administration of questionnaire, as well as non-participant observation under the theoretical and qualitative research approaches. Descriptive research method, Case Study approach and Document Analysis were adopted for this study. Eighty-Five respondents consisting of General Knowledge in Art tutors and General knowledge in Art students from five schools in the Ashanti region, Eastern Region and Greater Accra Region and W.A.E.C. Examiners as well as members of the Curriculum Research Development Division of the Ministry of Education were purposively and stratified Randomly sampled for the study. The study maintains that the content of the art history component of the General Knowledge in Art subject has to be reviewed by incorporating more of the histories of the indigenous Art from Africa. It puts forward proactive suggestions to the Curriculum and Research Development Division of various Educational Centers and other agencies responsible for making educational decisions on how they can intensify the study of African indigenous art histories in the General Knowledge in Art subject. This would greatly assist in the promotion, propagation, preservation and instruction of West African students on the indigenous African Art histories.

**Keywords:** African Indigenous Arts, Art history, Curriculum, General Knowledge in Art (G.K.A), Learning Outcome

## 1. Introduction

General Knowledge in Art is a composite of the basic knowledge in all the visual arts subjects, together with Art History and Appreciation (C.R.D.D.,2010). This area of study delves into the study of various branches of visual arts such as Painting, Picture making, Graphic Design, Textiles, Leatherwork, Pottery and Ceramics, Basketry, Goldsmithing and Blacksmithing, Calabash Art, Jewellery etc. Though the study of these aspects of Visual arts is not treated in details, it helps learners in obtaining core knowledge about the arts. It gives learners the basis on which they can further their studies in any of the art areas. The Art History component of the subject revolves around the study of the visual arts in civilization. It examines changing values in all fields of visual culture, including painting, sculpture, graphics, photography, architecture, film, the mass media, and forms of popular expression. Its interdisciplinary reach encompasses literature, history, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, gender studies, critical theory, and cultural studies. Art History emphasizes visual as well as verbal and written literacy, providing more than the standard advantages to a liberal arts education. It involves knowledge about great artists, their techniques, the methods they adopted to preserve art items, their culture, and their tradition (Johnson, 1994).

One of the vibrant general aims of the G.K.A. subject according to the Curriculum Research Development Division (2010) is for the students to appreciate art as an integral part of life; develop pride, confidence and patriotism through appreciation of their own art creations. This appreciation according to the same source is largely rooted in the study of Art History. This area of study aids learners in tracing the historical backgrounds of the arts of various ethnic societies in the world. This deepens their appreciation for the arts. It also helps in fostering learner's creativity and appreciation of his or her artistic heritage which is the bedrock of development in every nation. Moreover, it aid learners in developing a consciousness which makes them sensitive to expressive activities such as sports, music and dance etc. The Art History component of the subject

is designed to enlighten learners on the meanings and relevance of art. This appreciation helps in raising the role and study of art in the nation. The study also serves as a tool in providing visual education on governmental issues and other social vices such as drug abuse, primary health care, political issues etc. Highlighting the relevance of knowledge in Art History, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Industry Strategy 1994 pointed out that it ensures the development of critical thinking and the integration of research and knowledge. It adds that knowledge in Art History provides an excellent grounding for professions as diverse as law, medicine, and business while grooming students for advanced study in Art History, Architecture, and Cultural Studies. It also serves as the foundation for careers in teaching, art administration, museums, galleries, historic preservation, art libraries, publishing, journalism, advertising, art conservation, and art investment.

The syllabus planning committee for visual art therefore realizes the need to study the history of artistic development of selected societies around the globe and the role that art played in their development. Advances in the study of Art History have made an impact on the economic development of nations and improved the quality of life in most parts of the world. Notwithstanding, there is equally or even greater importance in studying the indigenous art histories of one's own country. This is because the study of the history of the indigenous cultures of nations has become an iconic flagship in the promotion of their cultural specificity and difference as noted by Johnson, (1996). The ATSIC Cultural Policy Framework 1995 noted that the renaissance of the history of indigenous artistic and cultural heritage has been important in reviving notions of national identity and national culture in Australia. Johnson, (1996) therefore proposes the need to protect indigenous cultural and intellectual property. To help Ghana as a country and West Africans in general to protect, preserve and promote the rich indigenous artistic and cultural heritage of Africa, the researcher suggests that the antidote is by intensifying the study of indigenous art histories of Africa especially West African art histories in the Art History component of the General Knowledge in Art subject which is offered largely by thousands of young Senior High School students offering Visual Arts, General Arts and Home Economics in the Senior High Schools in West Africa.

Unfortunately, the findings from the preliminary research conducted by the researcher revealed that the content of the Art History component in the General Knowledge in Art subject as dictated by the G.K.A. teaching syllabus is foreign bias. The vast Art History to be taught students is crowded with foreign art histories with few indigenous African art histories. Moreover, students find the study of Art History as uninteresting and boring because a larger aspect of the content is alien to them. These challenges have been in existence since the inception of the subject in 1993. It is upon this background that the researcher felt motivated to research and probe into the content of the Art History component of the General Knowledge in Art subject for Senior High Schools in West Africa with the aim of unraveling its challenges in the area of content. This would enhance and promote the study of Art History in various Senior High Schools across West Africa while ensuring the promotion and revival of our rich indigenous African artistic and cultural heritage which is bedrock to the development of Ghana and her African counterparts.

### *1.1. Content and its selection*

In the realms of curriculum studies, content is used in the broadest sense to refer to those aspects of the culture of a given people which are considered important to be passed on to the younger generation (Adentwi, 2005). Nicholls and Nicholls (1978) describe it as the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to be learned. This implies that 'content' in a broader usage is not limited to the information contained in books but also the values, knowledge, skills, attitudes imparted to learners for the survival of the society.

In a narrower view, Taba (1962) describes it as a related body of facts, generalizations, theories or any predetermined arrangement of a particular segment of knowledge or subject matter. The body of knowledge which comprises the learning materials of a course of study is the content, the makeup or what is to be taught in a subject. There is a set duration for the completion of any subject or course of study. Owing to this, there is the need to select the content that will help in realizing the aims, purposes and objectives of education in that area of study (Adenwi, 2005, p. 203). The selection of the content must revolve around the values, attitudes and beliefs of a people. Every selected component of content must be taught by the tutor. A selective teaching of content results in students' lack of relevant skill and attitude that ensures societal growth. Thus, for the content of an area of study to be considered appropriate, it must reflect the ideas of the learners' society. This means that the content of the art history component of the G.K.A. subject notwithstanding the relevance of foreign art histories must incorporate more of the indigenous African art histories which mirror the cultural values and norms in the African societies of the learners.

### *1.2. Teaching Syllabus and Its Impact on Content Selection*

A syllabus is an account of a course which serves as a guide to teachers and instructors. The Online Etymology Dictionary traces the word to a Greek word "Sittybos" which literally means 'parchment label' or 'table of content'. In Wilkins (1981) words, syllabuses are "specifications of the content of teaching which have been submitted to some degree of structuring or ordering with the aim of making teaching and learning a more

effective process." A syllabus can also be seen as "a plan of what is to be achieved through our teaching and our students' learning" (Breen, 1984a) while its function is "to specify what is to be taught and in what order" (Prabhu, 1984). Hutchinson and Waters (1987, P. 80) define syllabus at its simplest level "as a statement of what is to be learnt". Yalden (1987, P. 87) also refers to syllabus as a "summary of the content to which learners will be exposed". Candlin (1984) is of the view that syllabuses for teaching should be planned and written by the teachers and students concerned that is why he points out that syllabuses are "social constructions, produced interdependently in classrooms by teachers and learners...They are concerned with the specification and planning of what is to be learned, frequently set down in some written form as prescriptions for action by teachers and learners."

It is true that when syllabuses are written, the end users of it thus the teachers and learners have to be involved in its preparation (Amoakohene, 2006). This would ensure that the end users would be familiar with its implementation and may even make some relevant suggestions even in what is to be taught and in what form. These consultations would maximize the effectiveness or workability of the syllabus. In Africa where syllabuses are planned and prepared by a board or body thus the Curriculum Research and Development Division, there should be a way of seeking the views of especially teachers on what is to be included in the syllabus and in what style or form. When this is done, teachers would be able to voice out the challenges they face in the implementation of the syllabus in the classroom. With the General Knowledge in Art syllabus, the researcher is of the view that if the views of tutors of the subject were solicited, the seemingly loopholes in the Art History component would have been identified and rectified. Involving tutors of the subject in the syllabus preparation has several benefits. One of these is that since these tutors fully understand the makeup of the syllabus and were factored in its preparation and planning, it would make it very easy for them to effectively use it in the teaching and learning activities.

### *1.3. The Content of the Art History component in the G.K.A. Syllabus*

In the socio-economic development of Africa, the curriculum planners realized the need for students to study the history of artistic development of selected societies and the role that art played in their development, explaining the reasons why the foreign Art histories were incorporated in the syllabus (C.R.D.D., 2010). This would be an eye opener to Africans regarding the great impact that Visual Arts have on the economic development of several nations and how it has improved the quality of life of many people in most parts of the world. Admittedly, the curriculum planners also saw the great and urgent need to help the young people in developing their skills and capabilities so that they can contribute significantly to the development, preservation and promotion of African art forms through their education and training. This knowledge, the team revealed can be acquired through the study of the indigenous art histories of Africa. Johnson, (1996) agrees with the curriculum planners when he admitted that the knowledge about great artists, their techniques, the methods they adopted to preserve art items, their culture, and their tradition which are the main components of Art History can help in the preservation of art forms and the cultural elements inherent in them. Thus, the foreign art histories and the indigenous African art histories are all relevant. However, in terms of measure, which one should outweigh the other? The answer takes us back to what Nicholls and Nicholls (1978) cited earlier said concerning the goals of education and what informs the selection of content for the study of a subject. This selection is aimed finally at ensuring the survival of the values and norms of the society. This underwrites the essence of incorporating more of the indigenous African art histories as against the foreign art histories.

Among the ten general aims of the subject, five of them are to be met through the study of Art History. These are:

1. Appreciate art as an integral part of life.
2. Develop pride, confidence and patriotism through appreciation of the students' own art creations.
3. Develop the capacity for creativity through exposure to variety of art activities using traditional and contemporary tools and materials.
4. Be visually literate in skills, competencies and in modes of art appreciation and criticism.
5. Be exposed to the philosophical, anthropological and religious values of art (C.R.D.D., 2010).

These aims set by the curriculum planners highlight the immense relevance of the study of Art History in the General Knowledge in Art subject. The main topics which are in the field of Art History in the syllabus for General Knowledge in Art comprises:

- Prehistoric art
- Egyptian art
- Greek art
- Oriental art- Indian art, Japanese art, Chinese art
- Oceanic art-Polynesian art, Melanesian art
- Philosophy of African art
- Indigenous African art

- Contemporary African art
- African indigenous artforms and artists- visual arts and performing arts
- Contemporary African arts
- Renaissance art
- Modern art traditions- mannerism, neoclassicism, romanticism, realism, expressionism, impressionism, surrealism, op art, pop art, fauvism, futurism, cubism, dadaism, minimalism
- Post Modern art
- Conceptual art
- Contextual art

## 2. Methodology

The researcher used the case study design under the qualitative research approach for the research. This method involves the making of careful inquiry, critical analysis or investigation and examination seeking the facts of a case or an issue etc. with the aim of obtaining reliable facts to help correct, verify, devise, improve and re-evaluate policies, decisions, attitudes and knowledge. Kumekpor (2002, p. 100). It assisted the researcher in investigating the content of the art history component of the General Knowledge in Art subject with the view of finding out whether it is foreign biased so as to balance it with the indigenous African art history to help improve the study of art history in Ghana and West Africa as a whole.

Moreover, the qualitative research method with its planned research enabled the researcher in exploring the extent and reasons why the Art history component of the G.K.A. subject places much attention on foreign art histories at the expense of the histories of the rich African indigenous arts while assessing its learning outcomes. Also, the researcher used this approach to solicit for the views of the sampled respondents which are abstract qualities thus making the qualitative research method very suitable for this research (Best, 1981). The purposive sampling method was used for selecting the sample for the study from the population of G.K.A. teachers, G.K.A. students, G.K.A. W.A.E.C. Examiners, and members of the General Knowledge in Art syllabus planning committee.

Specifically, three (3) General Knowledge in Art teachers and five (5) General Knowledge in Art students in each of the five schools in all the three selected Regions thus Ashanti region, Eastern Region and the Greater Accra Region and twenty (20) members of the General Knowledge in Art syllabus planning committee and W.A.E.C. examiners of the General knowledge in Art subject was involved in this study. Out of this number, thirty (30) General Knowledge in Art teachers, forty five (45) students and ten (10) members of the General Knowledge in Art syllabus planning committee and W.A.E.C. Examiners constituting a total of eighty five (85) respondents was selected as the total sample. Non-participant observations, interviews as well as questionnaire were the main instrumentations that were used for soliciting the required data for the study. The data analysis spiral that utilizes the interpretivist philosophical paradigm in analyzing data was employed for analyzing the accrued data for the study.

The data was carefully analysed using the objectives for the study upon which the research questions were developed to interpret the phenomena under study. Preliminary interpretations of the organized data were made. The data was then classified into related themes. Meanings and interpretations were then gleaned from each of the classes by identifying the general patterns they create. The general interpretation of the data obtained for the study was then laid bare. Conclusions and recommendations from the data were made to assist curtail the problem with the content of the art history component of the G.K.A. subject.

## 3. Results and Discussions

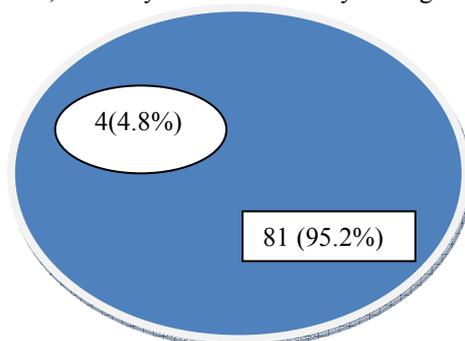
### 3.1. Objective 1: To investigate the content of the Art History component in the General Knowledge in art subject for S.H.S in Ghana

These are the main findings based on the primary data obtained from the responses received through the questionnaire administered, interviews and observation. The researcher found out that the content of the art history component in the General Knowledge in Art is indeed foreign biased. In terms of percentages, the content of the foreign art histories outweighs the indigenous African art history. Eighty-one respondents out of the Eighty-five respondents sampled for the study were in consensus that the art history content in the G.K.A. subject is foreign biased. They mentioned the time allocations for the teaching of the foreign art histories which took larger part of the contact hours to teach the art history component of the subject. Also, the study revealed that while the foreign art histories are taught in all the three years the students study the subject, the African indigenous art histories that are shallowly represented in the G.K.A. teaching syllabus are taught in only two terms in the second year as was remarked by an experienced General Knowledge in Art tutor and his students in one of the Senior High Schools sampled for the study. However, four respondents who were two members from the Curriculum Research Development Division and two G.K.A. tutors opined in the interview sessions that they don't see the bias in the foreign art histories and the indigenous African art histories. . One G.K.A. tutor said:

‘The foreign art histories are not that much when compared with the African art histories’. When they were questioned severally they could not support their claim with substantial evidence.

A critical observation of the teaching notes given to students who were in their final years showed that the art history content was largely foreign biased as purported by the G.K.A. teachers and G.K.A. students. This buttressed the analysis of the General knowledge in Art teaching syllabus undertaken by the researcher where he noticed the great emphasis placed in the teaching of the foreign art histories as against the indigenous African art histories.

The W.A.E.C. G.K.A. examiners mentioned that the questions on art history that are asked students in their final West African Senior High School Examination in the General Knowledge in Art subject are mostly based on the foreign art histories. When the researcher assessed the W.A.S.S.C. General Knowledge in Art final year examination test items since 1993, it clearly revealed that they were geared more to the foreign art histories.



*Fig.1. Respondents percentage ratio on the objective one of the study*

Probing further in finding out the likely causes or reasons that might have accounted for the biased nature of the content in the art history component, it was revealed to the researcher by some of the W.A.E.C. examiners that it may have been because most of the members on the G.K.A. syllabus planning committee had the greater part of their education in foreign countries, having this knowledge because of personal familiarization with them. This may be true because one’s educational background including the geographical location, resources and social atmosphere usually exerts a great impact on his/her training, choices and aspirations (Chowa, Masa, Ramos & Ansong, 2013). However, some of the G.K.A. teachers interviewed rather attributed the cause of the foreign biased nature of the art history content of the syllabus to lack of books on African indigenous art history and the abundance of books on the foreign art histories especially the Western art history. This assertion may have a degree of validity because some of the G.K.A. teachers admitted that there is great difficulty in finding books on indigenous art history to even teach the shallowly represented topics in the teaching syllabus. This affirms what Kochhar (2004) opined that the lack of textbooks and other educational resources for the teaching of a particular content in the teaching syllabus adversely affects its delivery by teachers resulting in poor academic performance. The availability of the foreign art histories makes it a potent choice to be taken as far as the study of art history is concerned. This probably was true in the case of the members of the syllabus planning committee of the G.K.A. subject.

### *3.2. Objective 2: To analyse the impacts of the foreign biased nature of the content of the Art History component in the General Knowledge in Art subject for S.H.S. in Ghana*

The researcher through his observations noticed that the foreign biased nature of the content of the art history component of the General Knowledge in Art subject has impacted quite negatively on the learning outcomes of learners defeating the general aims for the art history component of the subject which is to assist learners in developing pride, confidence and patriotism through appreciation of the students’ own art creations. The observations made laid to bare that the foreign concept of design especially that from Europe has largely influenced the artistic creations of the students. Most of them employ designs that are floral, geometric, spiral etc. without having any philosophical concepts behind their use. It is basically ‘art for art sake’ as most Western arts are characterized (Adom, 2011). The cultural symbols and ideologies that are uniquely African were rarely used by some of the students. It was even regretting to know that most of the students who used the indigenous African symbols did not understand their philosophical meanings and interpretations. If the indigenous African art histories were intensified in the teaching of the art history component of the G.K.A. subject, this problem would have not surfaced.



Fig. 2. Some Students' designs influenced by the Foreign Art Histories

Moreover, it was difficult for most of the students to trace the artistic and cultural histories of their own indigenous African arts. However, they were able to narrate the foreign art histories, even mentioning the European art movements with ease and the philosophies behind their formations.

*3.3. Objective 3: To suggest ways of improving the content of the Art History component in the General Knowledge in Art subject for S.H.S. to improve students' learning outcomes*

The researcher solicited the views of some of the respondents regarding ways of improving the content of the art history component of the G.K.A. subject to improve the learning outcomes. Majority of the respondents said that the current teaching syllabus for the teaching of the art history component of the G.K.A. subject to reflect more of the indigenous African art histories and lessen the foreign art histories. This they suggested can be done by merging some of the foreign histories that share many commonalities such as Japanese Art, Chinese Art, Indian Art and Korean Art and treating it as Oriental Art while the tutor would sparingly point out there unique differences. Probing further in finding out how the ratios of the foreign art histories and the African art histories have to be done, the figure below was the draft accepted by the majority.

FOREIGN ART HISTORIES	AFRICAN ART HISTORIES
Prehistoric Art	Egyptian Art
Greek Art	Ghanaian Art
Oceanic Art	Nigerian Art
Oriental Art	Malian Art
Influential European Art Movements	Sierra Leone Art
Modern Art Traditions	Arts of Ivory Coast
	Benin Art
	Togo Art

Fig.3. The Proposed Content of the Art history Component of the G.K.A. Subject

Some of the respondents also suggested that the current problem with the content of the art history component of the G.K.A. subject being foreign biased is because of the scarcity of books on African indigenous art histories when compared with the foreign art history books that are readily available on the market and online. Thus, many respondents suggested that art historians and authors must endeavour to write more books on African indigenous art histories. The availability of books on African indigenous art histories will make it easy for the G.K.A. tutors to teach it. Also, it would make it easy for the G.K.A. syllabus planning committee to incorporate more of the indigenous African art histories.

**4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the study attempted to evaluate the challenges associated with the content of the art history component of the General Knowledge in art and its implication on art history education in West Africa. The study concluded that indeed there are challenges associated with the content of the art history component of the G.K.A. subject since its foreign biased. The causes of the foreign biased nature of the content were attributed to factors such as the foreign educational background of the developers of the G.K.A. teaching syllabus as well as lack of books on indigenous African Art histories. The research unveil the impacts of the foreign biased nature of the content of the art history component of the G.K.A. subject as affecting the learning outcomes of students negatively, making them appreciate more of foreign cultural values while being handicapped in the cultural values of their own indigenous African arts. The study thus suggested ways of intensifying the study of the indigenous African art histories and have forwarded these recommendations for implementation by the responsible agencies and stakeholders in education to arrest the identified challenges.

1. The G.K.A. syllabus planning committee must incorporate more of the indigenous African art histories in the content of the art history component of the G.K.A. syllabus.
2. The Ministry of Education and the other educational agencies must task and sponsor African art historians and authors to write on the African indigenous Art histories.
3. Workshops and seminars must be periodically organized for G.K.A. teachers and G.K.A. students to instruct them on how they can teach the indigenous African Art histories.
4. The team that prepares the G.K.A. syllabus must seek the views of G.K.A. teachers and students who are the end users of the syllabus to help address future lapses with the syllabus.
5. Skilled educationists and curriculum planners who are well versed in the field of indigenous African art histories and have seen the implementations in the Indigenous African art society must be on the syllabus planning team for the G.K.A. subject .

## References

- Adentwi, K. I (2000). *Curriculum Development, An Introduction*. Kumasi: Skies Publications
- Adom, D. (2011). *General Knowledge in Art for S.H.S*. Kumasi: Adom Series Publications
- Amoakohene, S.K. (2006). *Teaching and Learning in higher education*. Kumasi: Seneps Publications
- Best, W. J. (1981). *Research in Education*. New York: Prentice Hall Inc. Englewood Cliffs
- Breen, M. (1984). *Process Syllabus for the Language Classroom*. In C.J. Brumfit (Ed), *General English Syllabus Design* ELT Document, Oxford: Pergamon Press
- Candlin, C.N. (1984). *Syllabus Design as a Critical Process*. ELT Documents, No. 118, 29-46, London
- Chowa, G.A.N., Masa, R. D., Ramos, Y. & Ansong, D. (2013). *How Do Student and School Characteristics Influence Youth Academic Performance in Ghana?* Washington D.C.: Centre for Social Development, Washington University, CSD Working Papers No. 13-16 Retrieved 16 June 2016, from <http://csd.wusti.edu>
- Curriculum Research Development Division (2010). *General Knowledge in Art Teaching Syllabus for S.H.S*. Ghana: Ministry of Education
- Hutchinson, T. & Waters, A. (1987). *English for Specific Purposes: A Learning Centred Approach*. CUP
- Johnson, V. (1996). *Copyrites: Aboriginal Art in the Age of Reproductive Technologies, Toruing Exhibition 1996 Catalogue*, Published by the NIAA and Macquarie University
- Kochhar, R. (2004). *The Wealth of Hispanic Households: 1996-2002*. Pew Hispanic Center Working Paper
- Kumekpor, K. B. (2002). *Research Methods & Techniques of Social Research*. Ghana: SonLife Printing Press and Services
- Nicholls, A. & Nicholls, S. (1972). *Developing a Curriculum: A practical Guide*. London: Allen & Unwin
- Prahu, N.S. (1984). *Procedural Syllabus*. In T. (Eds) *Trends in Language Syllabus Design*. Singapore: University Press
- Taba, H. (1962). *Curriculum Development: Theory and Practice*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World
- Wilkins, D.A. (1981). *Notional Syllabuses Revisited*. *Applied Linguistics*, 2(1), 83-89
- Yalden, J. (1987). *Principles of Course Design for Teaching*. CUP