

RESEARCH REPORT

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# Lost for Words

**Improving information access for  
refugees and migrants in Greece**

September 2017



**MMP** | MIXED  
MIGRATION  
PLATFORM



This report was produced by Translators Without Borders in the framework of the Mixed Migration Platform.

The Mixed Migration Platform (MMP) is a joint-NGO initiative providing quality mixed migration-related information for policy, programming and advocacy work, as well as critical information for people on the move. The platform was established by seven partners – ACAPS, Danish Refugee Council (DRC), Ground Truth Solutions, Internews, INTERSOS, REACH and Translators Without Borders (TWB) – and acts as an information hub on mixed migration in the region.

For more information visit: [www.mixedmigrationplatform.org](http://www.mixedmigrationplatform.org)

#### About Translators Without Borders

Translators without Borders (TWB) is a non-profit organization working to ensure that refugees and migrants receive information in a language and format that they can understand. We provide translation and language capacity building services to help facilitate appropriate two-way communication between affected communities and the non-profit organizations supporting them. We believe in a world where knowledge knows no language barriers. For more information, visit our website: [www.translatorswithoutborders.org](http://www.translatorswithoutborders.org)

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## Introduction: Comprehension is more than translation

TWB is committed to improving vital communications between humanitarian/development agencies and the people they aim to support by building linguistic capacity in under-resourced languages. A significant proportion of the at-risk population in the developing world is not proficient in major world languages and, as a result, remains linguistically marginalized. Research has further shown that affected communities prefer to receive and are more likely to trust communications in their mother tongue, particularly with issues of health and well-being, and in times of crisis. Refugees and migrants are no exception.

Refugees and migrants need to be able to communicate with service providers and legal advisers about their situation. When this is not possible, vulnerable individuals may be unable to access appropriate care or guidance. In its first phase of language research in Greece (April 2017), TWB studied the impact of language on refugee and migrant children. In a socio-linguistic study of refugee children in Greece, humanitarian workers and teachers identified language as a major challenge in assisting children.<sup>1</sup> Research by REACH and UNICEF highlighted risks—including dropping out of the formal reception system—when refugee and migrant children do not receive information in a language they understand.<sup>2</sup>

Yet addressing language barriers is not just about translation. Other factors include literacy levels among sections of the population and the format information is received in. In its second phase of comprehension testing in Greece, this time focused on adults, TWB found that, while the vast majority preferred to receive information in their mother tongue, and 85 percent claimed to be literate, only 44 percent were actually able to understand written content provided by humanitarians.<sup>3</sup> Even so, there was a strong preference for written information (perhaps to be read by others), which was seen as more permanent.

Now in phase three, TWB partnered with RefuComm<sup>4</sup> to assess how language and format affect comprehension among refugees and migrants. The goal was to gain insights that would help partners improve the information provision in Greece, but also to refugees and migrants anywhere in the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Translators Without Borders and Save the Children (2017) 'Language & Comprehension Barriers in Greece's Migration Crisis,' June 2017.

<sup>2</sup> REACH (2017) 'Children on the Move in Italy and Greece,' June 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Translators Without Borders and Save the Children (2017) 'Language & Comprehension Barriers in Greece's Migration Crisis,' June 2017.

<sup>4</sup> RefuComm is a non-profit organisation that has been disseminating important information to refugees and migrants in Greece in English, Arabic, Farsi, and Urdu. TWB translates the information, which is provided in a range of formats.

## Key findings

The limited size of the sample and issues with the testing format must be considered when drawing conclusions from this study. However, these indicative findings provide some insights for government services and aid organisations working with refugees and migrants in Greece:

All participants on Chios said they had received no information on their rights, asylum procedures, and services on the island when they first arrived. They reported that it was extremely difficult to find information in their mother tongue.

The language in which information is provided is critical. The majority of respondents (89 percent) would prefer to receive information in their mother tongue.

Participants were nearly twice as likely to understand information provided in their mother tongue as in English. English is an ineffective language with this audience, understood by less than 25 percent of the sample. Only two women understood the English text. Using English means that many refugees and migrants, women in particular, will miss out on information.

Even when information is translated, it may not be understood: more than half of participants did not understand the information provided to them in their mother tongue. More research is needed to understand this issue. Other language approaches beyond translation should be considered, such as re-writing materials in plain English and designing materials with the guidance of the affected population (transcreation).

The format of information is a critical factor in understanding. Less educated participants were less likely to comprehend a written document than information presented in other formats.

The majority of participants (78 percent) preferred to receive information by word of mouth or in video format. This should be seen in the light of a preference for written documents highlighted in research with a larger sample.<sup>5</sup> Using a mix of formats may be the most effective across a range of audiences.

## Changing circumstances

Chios island in Greece is a transit point for refugees and migrants arriving in Europe. Since the European Union signed an agreement with Turkey in March 2016 to stem irregular migration into Europe, a growing number have been unable to leave Chios for the mainland.<sup>6</sup> The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated

<sup>5</sup> Translators Without Borders and Save the Children (2017) 'Language & Comprehension Barriers in Greece's Migration Crisis,' June 2017.

<sup>6</sup> On March 19, 2016, the European Union and Turkey signed an agreement that called for the deportation back to Turkey of all the people who entered the Greek borders illegally after March 20, 2016, as long as Turkey is considered a 'safe third country' or 'a first country of asylum' for each individual case.

that 3,600 people were stranded on the island in July 2017, crowded into accommodation sites that have capacity for only 1,300.<sup>7</sup>

All have questions about their future. As management of support for refugees and migrants on the islands passes to the Greek government, they may also have further questions about the services available to them.<sup>8</sup> Yet research has documented significant gaps in information provision on Chios.<sup>9</sup> TWB's research looked at factors in improving access to and comprehension of information for refugees and migrants.

## Understanding the extent of the problem

Vulnerable refugees and migrants are struggling to get the information they need, and service providers find it difficult to communicate with a multilingual group. Little is known about how language and format affect refugees' and migrants' ability to understand information. Comprehension testing is the only reliable way to assess that understanding.

TWB's partner, RefuComm works to improve the information flow to refugees. In July and August, 2017, TWB partnered with RefuComm to test comprehension of translated materials on asylum in Greece and refugee rights. The research was conducted on Chios and at two sites in Boeotia, on the Greek mainland.

### Focus groups

On Chios, 35 people (23 men and 12 women) participated in six focus group discussions. We designed these to gauge people's information needs, and the extent of their access to information in their own language since they arrived on the island. There were no focus groups in Boeotia.

### Comprehension tests

Refugees and migrants at all locations also participated in individual comprehension testing in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu, depending on their country of origin. 63 refugees and migrants took part: 49 men and 14 women.<sup>10</sup> Most participants came from Syria (27) and Afghanistan (17), two of the main countries of origin of refugees and migrants in Greece.<sup>11</sup> Participants living on Chios had been there for an average of four months; across the whole sample the median stay in Greece was two months.

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<sup>7</sup> UNHCR (2017) 'Europe Refugee Emergency,' 18 July 2017.

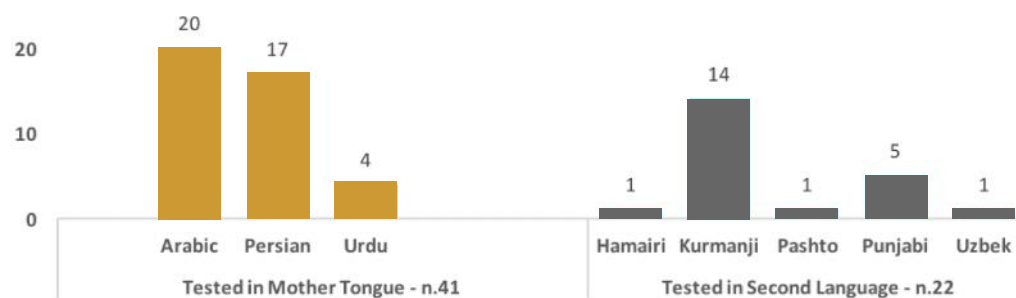
<sup>8</sup> In July, seven NGOs warned that a lack of planning for this transition could result in gaps in service provision for vulnerable individuals. 'Lack of handover plans for the response in Greece puts asylum seekers at risk, NGOs warn,' 11 July 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Refugee Rights Data Project (2017) 'Key Research Findings: The Human Rights Situation in Chios,' May 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Thirty-five participants participated in Chios (23 male, 12 female) and 28 in two camps in Boeotia (26 male, two female).

<sup>11</sup> Others were from Pakistan (nine), Iraq (three), Yemen (two), the Occupied Palestinian Territories (two), Iran (two), and Kuwait (one).

Figure 1: Mother tongue of respondents (n.63)



TWB designed a tool to compare levels of understanding of information in different languages and formats.<sup>12</sup> The tool includes a series of demographic questions, close-ended Likert-scale questions, open-ended questions on language and format preferences, and a short testing component.

The tool was used to test participants' understanding of RefuComm information materials that TWB had translated. The materials included information on the asylum procedure in Greece and on the vulnerability criteria which are used to target assistance. The information was presented in three formats:

- text only;
- an infographic (simple graphics with limited text); and
- an animation with voiceover.

Respondents received the information in the language generally used to communicate with people of their nationality (Arabic for the Iraqi, Kuwaiti, Palestinian, Syrian, and Yemeni participants; Persian for the Afghan and Iranian participants;<sup>13</sup> and Urdu for the Pakistani participants).<sup>14</sup> They also read the text-only document in English.

Participants were then asked a series of questions about the information they received:

- one question on the text-only document in each language (English and one other);
- one question on the infographic; and
- three questions on the animation, which contained more information.

We coded their answers as either 'correct' or 'incorrect'. We measured comprehension of the animation as the mean number of correct answers to the three questions.

<sup>12</sup> The comprehension survey that TWB designed for this study is available at [Kobo Toolbox](#).

<sup>13</sup> Farsi and Dari are both dialects of Persian. They are very similar when written, but quite different when spoken. The voiceover for the animation in this case was performed by a Farsi speaker, which may have affected comprehension among native Dari speakers for that format.

<sup>14</sup> TWB has documented elsewhere how service providers make assumptions about the languages refugees and migrants understand on the basis of nationality. Anecdotal evidence indicates this is also happening in Greece. TWB (2017) *Putting language on the map in the European refugee response*, forthcoming.

## Limitations and extension to Boeotia

The original brief was to conduct all the research on Chios. However, testing conditions were unfavorable on Chios as a result of administrative changes to the support arrangements for refugees and migrants. As a result, the research team did not reach a usable sample size on the island, and decided mid-research to include Boeotia to expand the sample. The resulting sample is still small, with participants in Boeotia and Chios differing in profile and situation. In addition, the research format differed slightly between Chios and Boeotia.<sup>15</sup>

## Multiple information challenges

### Access to information on Chios

Focus group discussions on Chios confirmed gaps in information provision. Participants reported that refugees and migrants were registered on arrival. This entailed being asked their names, fingerprinted, and given a room number for accommodation and a date for an asylum interview. No other information was given on arrival. Participants were not informed about their rights, the asylum procedure, the services available on the island, or next steps in the migration process.

Refugees and migrants were also hampered by connectivity problems in their efforts to obtain information. Participants reported difficulty accessing the internet because of poor or non-existent Wi-Fi and the high cost of mobile phone data.

Given these difficulties, RefuComm made their multilingual information available on SD cards that people could insert into phones for offline viewing. Some focus group members reported technical problems reading the cards on their phones, but nearly all appreciated the format. Participants commented that the legal information would have been most helpful if they had received it upon arrival or soon thereafter.

The information gaps highlighted by participants related to:

family reunification;

Greek law and their rights;

education opportunities; and

medical and other services available.

### Language preference

The majority of participants (89 percent) preferred to receive information in their mother tongue.<sup>16</sup> In most cases that language was Arabic. For others it was Dari, Farsi, Kurmanji, Punjabi, Urdu, Pashto, Uzbek, or Hamairi. The other 11 percent were mostly Punjabi and Pashto speakers who preferred to receive information in Urdu or Dari

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<sup>15</sup> This was due to differences in the technology available to test understanding of the animation. In Chios, the film was shown in its entirety on a projector and then participants were asked three questions about one section. In Boeotia, participants were shown a one-minute clip of the animation on tablets and asked the same three questions. All other testing parameters were the same.

<sup>16</sup> Out of 62 respondents. One person chose not to answer this question.

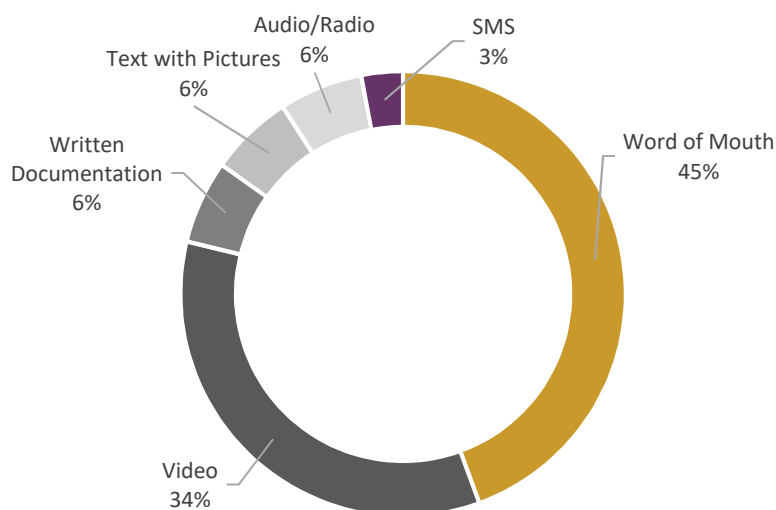


respectively. This may be because they were educated in those languages and are therefore more comfortable reading in those than in their mother tongue.

### Format preference

Researchers asked what format participants preferred to receive information in. Verbal communication (in person) was the most popular form (44 percent), while 34 percent preferred an audio-visual format (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Preferred format for information



### Comprehension rates

#### Impact of language and format on comprehension

Participants were nearly twice as likely to understand information provided in their mother tongue as they were in English (see Figure 3). For those participants tested in their second language, the difference was even more marked. This is important in view of the widespread use of English among service providers working with refugees and migrants in Greece.

The rates of comprehension amongst those tested in their mother tongue were:

- 46 percent - information in text-only format without pictures or other visual aids;
- 44 percent - animation with a voiceover and subtitles; and
- 41 percent - infographic.

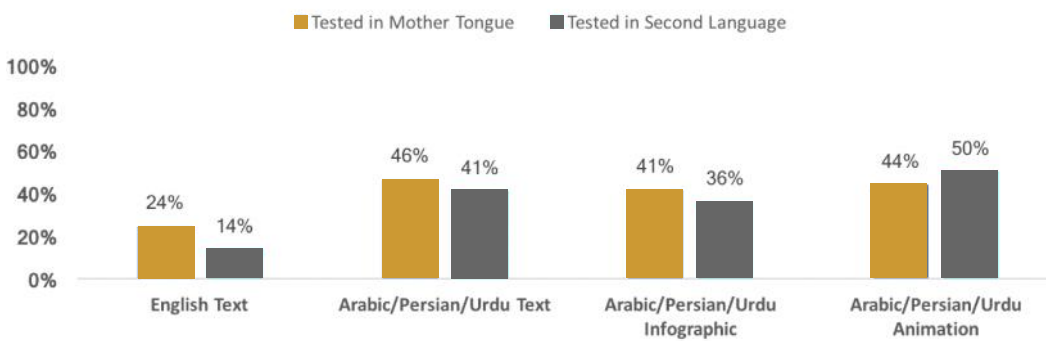
These results seem counter-intuitive, as the addition of graphics would normally aid comprehension. This finding does confirm the value of written information for refugees and migrants highlighted in earlier research, however.<sup>17</sup> The relatively low levels of comprehension even in participants' mother tongues also highlight that translation

<sup>17</sup> Translators Without Borders and Save the Children, 'Language & Comprehension Barriers in Greece's Migration Crisis,' June 2017.

alone is not enough: content must be appropriate to the audience. This may require simplification of technical or legal concepts, standard use of plain language, and ‘transcreation,’ or the development of materials in collaboration with affected people.

In focus groups, the vast majority of participants stated they were satisfied with the infographic and animation. This suggests that the information is useful when provided in these formats. The lower than expected comprehension rates for the animation could be partly due to a delay in some cases between viewing and answering questions. It was not always possible to show the animation immediately before the questions were asked.

Figure 3: Comprehension rates by format



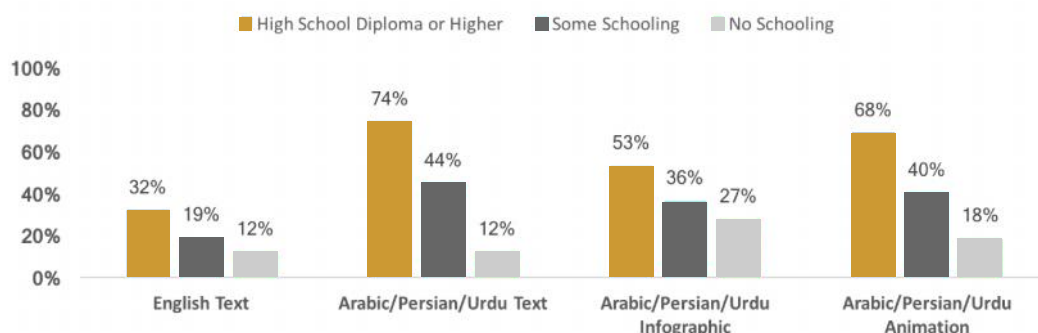
### Impact of education on comprehension

Literacy levels influence a person’s capacity to understand written text. As no data is published on literacy levels among refugees and migrants in Greece, TWB asked research participants about their level of education. Of the 63 participants:

- 27 percent had never received any schooling;
- 43 percent had received some schooling but no diploma; and
- 30 percent had obtained a high school diploma or higher.

The test results show a strong correlation between education levels and comprehension in all four formats tested. Animation was 50 percent more effective and an infographic more than twice as effective as a written document in conveying information to participants with no schooling. Respondents with higher levels of education scored highest for comprehension in all categories, including written English. The disparities were most marked for text-only material in the participant’s mother tongue or second language. Respondents with a high school diploma or higher were 62 percent more likely to understand the content than those with no schooling. Although overall comprehension rates were lower for the infographic format, the disparities between education levels were also lower.

Figure 4: Comprehension rates by level of education

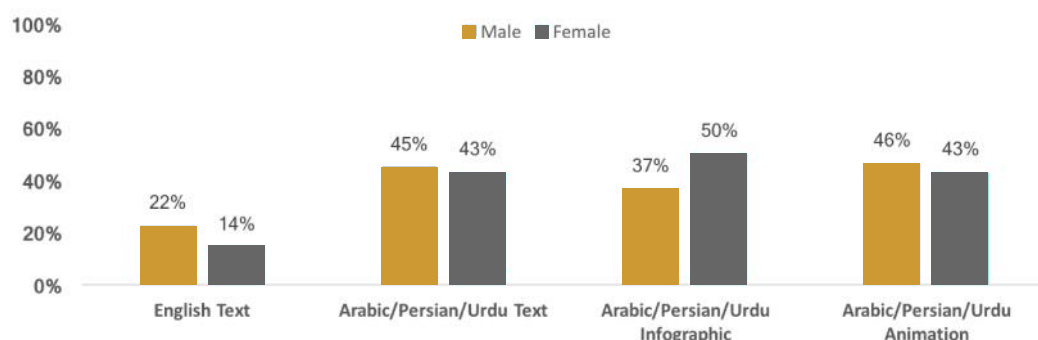


### Impact of gender on comprehension

Comprehension levels among women and men were broadly the same for the mother tongue materials (see Figure 5). Women had higher rates of comprehension on infographics than men, and men had higher rates than women on the text-only document and the animation. The 13 percent gender disparity in the infographic results could be partially attributed to that specific question being related to pregnancy as a vulnerability indicator.

Comprehension of English was lower among women. Only 14 percent of women understood the English document, compared with 22 percent of men.

Figure 5: Comprehension rates by gender



## Conclusions

Despite the small sample size of this study and issues with the testing formats, these indicative findings provide insights for government services and aid organisations working with refugees and migrants in Greece:

Information on rights, asylum procedures, and services should be provided to refugees and migrants in their mother tongue on arrival.

The language in which information is provided is critical: 89 percent would prefer to receive information in their mother tongue.

English is an ineffective language with this audience, understood by less than 25 percent of the sample. Only two women understood the English text.

Even when information is translated, it may not be understood: more than half of participants did not understand the information provided to them in their mother tongue. More research is needed to understand this issue. Other language approaches beyond translation should be considered, such as re-writing materials in plain English and designing materials with the guidance of the affected population (transcreation).

The format of information is a critical factor in understanding. Less educated participants were less likely to comprehend a written document than other formats.

Seventy-eight percent preferred to receive information by word of mouth or in video format. In view of the findings of earlier research showing a preference for written text, a mix of formats seems the best option.

