

# BRIDGING THE GAP

A Study on the Impact of Language Barriers on  
Refugee and Migrant Children in Greece

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## Executive Summary

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In April 2017, **Translators without Borders**, in partnership with **Save the Children**, set out to analyze how language affects refugee and migrant children in Greece. The resulting study documents children's language journeys since they left their home countries and what languages they have learned along the way. The research also explores communication challenges that humanitarian aid workers and teachers face in their daily interactions with these children.

The research was based on a specially designed, participatory activity or game which researchers led with **refugee and migrant children**. The activity was complemented by interviews with **parents, humanitarian aid workers** and **teachers**. Communication was in Arabic, Kurmanji, Sorani, Farsi, Dari, Greek and English.



## Summary of findings

### Language as an asset

The research documents the way in which refugee and migrant children encounter new languages as they cross several countries on their way to Europe. When they arrive in Greece, they often use translanguaging (i.e. a mix of languages) as a way to communicate with children from other backgrounds and interact with adult service providers and others. The experience of learning new languages can be empowering and a source of pride.

### Language as a barrier

But language support is essential to enable children to develop the communication skills they need in their host country. The quality of non-formal and formal education they receive along their journey and in their host community is varied. This is due in part to a lack of preparation and support for teachers on educating children in mixed language groups with little or no proficiency in Greek or English, or children who have experienced war, displacement and poverty.

### A shortage of language support

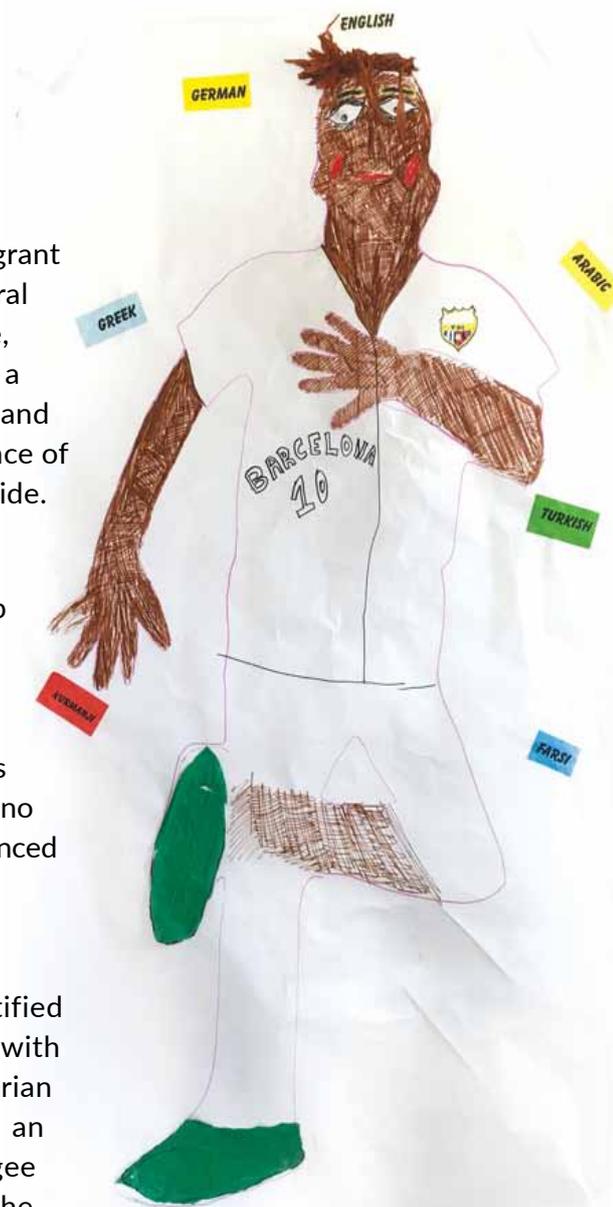
Humanitarian aid workers and teachers interviewed identified language barriers as one of the main challenges in their work with refugee and migrant children. Findings show that humanitarian aid workers in Greece rely heavily on the assistance of an interpreter or cultural mediator to communicate with refugee and migrant children, but these are in short supply, and the interviews suggest that education teams seem to have less access to interpreters or cultural mediators.

### Children in adult roles

Children who participated in this study also reported that Greek and English are the main languages spoken when they visit the doctor or hospital. Children are themselves called upon at times to translate or interpret for family members or peers who do not speak the local language. This can be a matter of concern where the content of the conversation is not appropriate for a child.

### Children's access to information

The research found that at the six camps included in the study, and in the experience of all 22 humanitarian aid workers interviewed, no information was being provided specifically to refugee and migrant children: it was assumed that information provided to parents will be passed on to children. The one exception was unaccompanied and separated children, who often receive information in the form of long and complex written documents inappropriate for their age.



## Key recommendations

Language and communication barriers are a two-way phenomenon. They affect refugee and migrant children and their families but also local residents and service providers, teachers, as well as international humanitarian aid and development workers. A number of practical steps could help overcome language and communication barriers and improve programming in light of these research findings.

### 1. Relevant authorities should map languages spoken in order to enable service providers to plan to meet needs.

In practice, this means:

- Gather data on written and spoken languages; distribute among all those providing services to refugees and migrants (humanitarian aid and development workers, volunteers, local services, etc.).
- Gather and disseminate data on levels of literacy, and preferred communication media (e.g. smartphone use, languages spoken and read).
- Gather and disseminate data on preferred format of communication (e.g. written, verbal or audio-visual).

### 2. Humanitarian aid workers, teachers and healthcare professionals working with refugee and migrant children should have the appropriate language skills or support to communicate effectively.

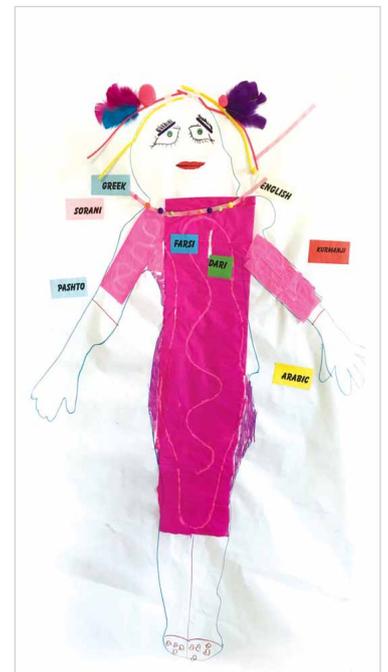
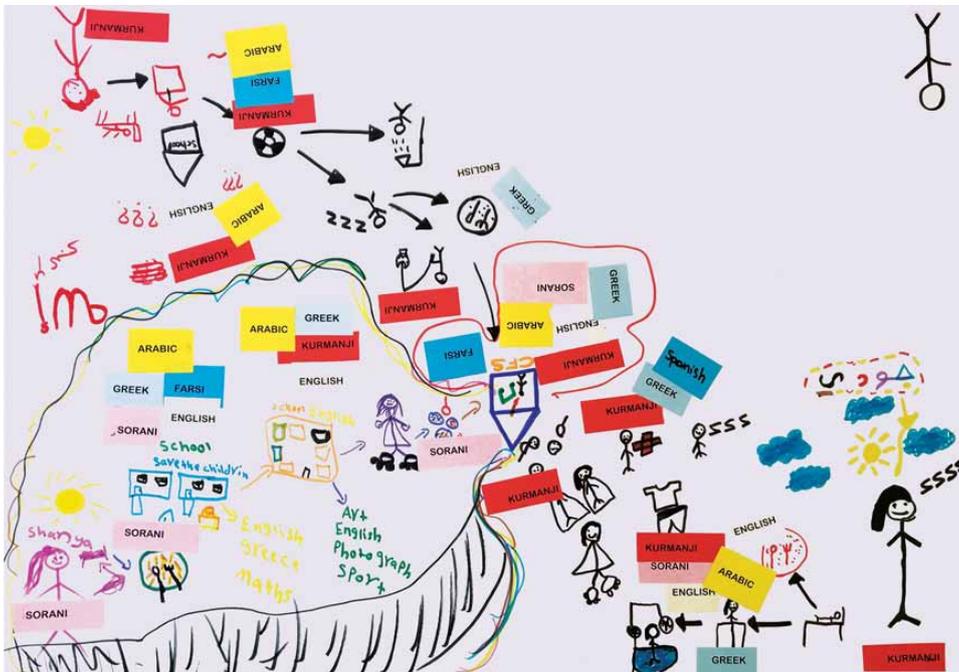
In practice, for aid organizations and health and education service providers, this means:

- Recognize and support the critical role of the interpreter in communications.
- Ensure interpreters and cultural mediators are trained and chosen to best suit the situation in which they are working (for example, with health or protection knowledge) and the person for whom they are interpreting (for example, a young woman interpreter for a girl).
- Provide specific training on communication challenges and strategies for humanitarian aid workers, teachers, healthcare professionals and others working with children and families who do not necessarily speak, understand or read the working languages of the camp or host country (Greek and English, in this instance).
- Brief those working with refugee and migrant populations on the origin and nuances of different languages, to counter fundamental misconceptions identified in the study.
- Train those working with refugee and migrant populations on non-verbal communication skills. Where potential good practice and communication strategies are being developed, gather “**lessons learned**” and use to train others.
- Provide essential vocabulary “**crib sheets**,” in the form of posters displayed in prominent places e.g. in a doctor’s waiting room, in the classroom. These should convey a **key word** or **concept**, “doctor,” visually and then in written form. Where the language in question uses a non-Latin alphabet, the word should be spelled phonetically.
- Understand the implications of large refugee and migrant influxes for the Greek education system and for local children. Seek extra teaching support and resources where possible, and provide language guidance to teachers; consider networking teachers to help them share ideas from their classrooms. Promote a positive and inclusive approach among staff. (How can we learn from and what can we share with new arrivals?)

3. Anyone who works for an organization coming into contact with children or providing services for children and families, has a responsibility to ensure that essential information is provided in a language and format that children understand. They are also responsible for facilitating child participation in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In practice, this means:

- Information should be provided in a format that is **appropriate to the child's age** and developmental stage.
- Do not assume that a person who converses easily in a language will also understand written information in that language.
- As a general rule, **keep written information to a minimum**. Favor visual communication (cartoons, posters, etc.) over text.
- Children often learn languages more quickly than adults and are commonly called upon to act as translators or interpreters for older family members. Humanitarian aid workers, teachers and healthcare staff should be mindful of this **"language broker"** role. While a child's role as translator/ interpreter should be celebrated as a skill and a source of pride, she should not be called upon to translate confidential or potentially distressing information (for example in a healthcare setting).
- Children know their daily realities better than any humanitarian aid worker ever can. Diverse experiences show the value of consulting children and young people of all ages. Not only does this give them an opportunity to tell of the fears, pressures and injustices they face, but it enables them to develop solutions to improve their lives. **Seek children's input and advice on programming wherever possible.**



The study was carried out as part of TWB's Words of Relief crisis relief program in Greece. The complete study, and other research products, such as the language factsheets, are available at: <https://translatorswithoutborders.org/about-us/resources/>