



# Determinants of refugee children's language comprehension difficulties: Evidence from Lebanon, Türkiye and Australia

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## Abstract

This article examines the determinants of Syrian refugee students' language comprehension difficulties in Lebanon, Türkiye and Australia, three host countries offering refugees different types of legal status (short-term, medium-term and long-term legal settlement). To understand the influence of legal status and its corresponding educational paradigm on the difficulties refugee children encounter when learning in a foreign language, the authors employed a mixed-methods comparative approach. Investigating the micro, meso and macro dimensions that shape refugee children's language comprehension difficulties, the authors surveyed 945 (52% female, 48% male) middle school refugee students and interviewed parents, teachers and principals. Their quantitative findings highlight the significance of the length of time spent in the host country and the role of school segregation in mitigating language comprehension difficulties. The qualitative findings of this study reveal the importance of language provision and residency conditions, which are shaped by macro-level policies. The study emphasises the need for a comprehensive and holistic approach that addresses distinct dimensions of refugees' livelihoods in order to surmount the challenges refugee children face when studying in a foreign language.

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## Résumé

Déterminants des difficultés de compréhension linguistique chez les enfants réfugiés : sur la base de preuves recueillies au Liban, en Turquie et en Australie – Le présent article examine les déterminants des difficultés de compréhension linguistique des élèves réfugiés syriens au Liban, en Turquie et en Australie, trois pays d'accueil offrant aux réfugiés différents types de statuts légaux (installation légale à court terme, moyen et long terme). Pour comprendre l'influence du statut légal et du paradigme éducatif correspondant sur les difficultés des enfants réfugiés à apprendre une langue étrangère, les auteurs ont recouru à une approche comparative mixte. Ils ont réalisé une enquête auprès de 945 collégiens (52 % de filles et 48 % de garçons) et interrogé des parents, enseignants et directeurs d'établissements pour explorer les micro-, méso- et macrodimensions desquelles découlent les difficultés de compréhension linguistique des enfants réfugiés. Leurs résultats quantitatifs font ressortir l'importance du temps passé dans le pays hôte et du rôle de la ségrégation scolaire dans l'atténuation des difficultés de compréhension linguistique. Les conclusions qualitatives de l'étude révèlent de leur côté le caractère essentiel de l'offre éducative linguistique et des conditions de résidence façonnées par les politiques publiques au macroniveau. L'étude met en évidence la nécessité d'adopter une approche globale et holistique qui aborde les différentes dimensions des moyens d'existence des réfugiés pour permettre à leurs enfants de surmonter les difficultés qu'ils rencontrent en apprenant une langue étrangère.

## Introduction

The Syrian crisis in 2011 led to a shift in research on refugee education, which attempted to address such crises (Shuayb and Crul 2020). This shift was also due to the development of Education in Emergencies (EiE) and its culmination in the minimum standards formulated by the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) in the year 2004, which have since been updated (INEE 2024). In the literature, two paradigms seem to be highlighted due to the domination of two research lines. The first paradigm is embedded in a humanitarian context and investigates the situation of refugees in the Global South who are granted temporary settlement in countries bordering their home countries through short-term interventions. The second paradigm is implemented in the context of resettlement and is thus concerned with refugees in the Global North, focusing on medium to long-term educational provision. Countries which adopt long-term educational policies differ from those that practise the emergency model in their educational provision, including curriculum, certification, segregation and language provisions. The fundamental difference between the two paradigms is that effective integration of refugee students into the educational system is more likely

to be achieved in countries of final settlement where refugee students learn with their national peers within the same classrooms (RACE PMU 2018).

This article examines the implications of both educational paradigms on refugee children's difficulties in comprehending the language of instruction in three selected countries: Australia, Türkiye and Lebanon. Australia handpicked 12,000 Syrian refugees and offered them permanent settlement, while Türkiye has shifted from an emergency model to a medium- or longer-term education response. In contrast, our third selected country case study is Lebanon, which exemplifies an education response that embodies the EiE paradigm.

Australia is a party to the *1951 Convention relating to the status of refugees* and its *1967 Protocol* (UNHCR 2011), and resettled 132,180 refugees from other countries between 2013 and 2022 (RCOA 2023, p. 4). School-aged Syrians were integrated into Australian public (state-run) schools, as Syrian refugees were offered long-term settlement. The Australian Education Act 2013 (PoA 2013) governs education in the country, yet locally, each state oversees educational policies. Although data on enrolment rates of Syrian refugees in Australia are scarce, all school-aged refugees are offered free education in Australian public schools, as are other migrants with permanent residency. In the first five years of settlement, refugee children are provided with intensive language support with a focus on the entire family. For example, the New Arrivals Programme (NAP) for refugee children in New South Wales<sup>1</sup> supports their English language learning and helps them access the Australian curriculum, which is followed by most state and territory schools, including Catholic and independent schools. Under the Multicultural Education policy, the Australian government is tied to the Australian Multicultural Advisory Council's *Statement on cultural diversity* (AMAC 2010). As a result, Australia's public schools are inclusive, and legislation has been passed to ensure that practical barriers to education are addressed (Blythe et al. 2018).

Türkiye is also a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol (UNHCR 2011) and hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees worldwide, as identified by UNHCR (2019a). In 2019, Türkiye hosted 3,626,734 registered Syrian refugees (ibid.). According to the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operation (ECHO 2017), most Syrian refugees live in Turkish cities, while only around 10% remain in the refugee camps. In 2011, Syrians were welcomed but expected to repatriate once the situation in Syria stabilised. However, researchers predict that 80% of Syrians in Türkiye will remain permanently (Aras and Yasun 2016; Beltekin 2016). Therefore, Syrian refugees' education response is evolving from an emergency to a longer-term paradigm. The shift from short-term to longer-term settlement in Türkiye is also recognised by granting Syrian refugees the right to permanent settlement. To enable Syrian children to continue their education, in 2014, Syrians were allowed to open their own schools known as "Temporary Education Centres" (TECs), and 291,000 Syrians continued their education in 404 such establishments in 20 cities in Türkiye (DGMM 2016). TECs followed the same

<sup>1</sup> For more information on NAP, visit <https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/multicultural-education/english-as-an-additional-language-or-dialect/new-arrivals-program> [accessed 10 February 2025].

curriculum and related materials that students would have been taught in Syria. Although 78% of Syrian refugee students attended TECs (Aras and Yasun 2016), a decision was nevertheless made to close them in 2016 in order to minimise refugee marginalisation (Eryaman and Evran 2019). The aim was to include refugee students in the mainstream education system within five years.

Lebanon, on the other hand, is not a signatory of the *1951 Convention relating to the status of refugees* or its *1967 Protocol* (UNHCR 2010) and thus advocates rapid repatriation of Syrian refugees. Lebanon has the world's fourth-largest refugee population and the largest concentration of refugees per capita (UNHCR 2019b, p. 10). Syrians are considered permanent "guests" since Lebanon does not provide any route to citizenship or permanent residency. Nevertheless, the government of Lebanon collaborated with United Nations (UN) agencies to provide Syrians with basic humanitarian aid, increase their employability, and grant them access to certified education (OCHA 2016). The Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) and UN agencies, supported by donors, developed two educational strategies, Reaching All Children in Education (RACE) I and II. RACE I was developed in 2014 and RACE II in 2017 to enrol school-age children (aged 3–18 years) in the public educational system. RACE I was planned on a temporary basis, since it was assumed that the children would eventually be repatriated. This caused difficulties relating to curriculum and language of instruction. The refugees were learning using an outdated curriculum developed in 1997 and were taught in either English or French, languages with which they were not familiar. Furthermore, most Syrian children were segregated from their Lebanese counterparts by attending school in the afternoon. Only a minority were able to attend the morning shift together with Lebanese children.

Educational provision therefore differs based on the type of settlement offered to refugees in their respective host countries, which affects students' ability to comprehend the language of instruction. This article investigates the micro, meso and macro factors that determine refugee students' language comprehension difficulties and considers the implications of the different educational paradigms offered under different types of settlement (short-term, medium-term and long-term). The significance of our study lies in our investigation of all three (micro, meso and macro) layers.

## Literature review

### The impact of language on the education of refugee children

The influence of language on refugee children's education is discussed extensively in the literature. Ida Kaplan (2016) highlights the need to consider the effects of language acquisition on refugees' cognitive functioning, learning and academic performance. Similarly, Haneen Alrawashdeh and Naciye Kunt (2022) highlight the challenges faced by both refugee children and their teachers, including linguistic and psychological barriers. Celia Reddick and Vidur Chopra (2023) argue for a more comprehensive approach to language inclusion in refugee education, emphasising

the importance of supporting refugees' linguistic needs to help them navigate the educational system. Several studies indicate that the use of a foreign language of instruction presents a major challenge for Syrian students (Vural et al. 2018; Alkhaldeh 2018; Şeker and Sirkeci 2015; Shuayb et al. 2014).

In Lebanon, Syrian students struggle to understand the language of instruction despite sharing their native language with the Lebanese population. Several subjects, mainly mathematics and sciences, are taught in English or French, which are unfamiliar foreign languages for Syrian refugees (Hamadeh 2018). To help them overcome the language barrier, MEHE in Lebanon decided to separate Syrian and Lebanese students. However, this was not enough to surmount the difficulties in understanding the language of instruction, moreover it led to an increase in dropout rates, mainly among children whose parents could not support them educationally because they were themselves unfamiliar with the languages used (NRC 2020).

The language barrier is also an issue in Türkiye, as the primary language of instruction in all Turkish public schools is Turkish. Unlike in Lebanon, extensive efforts were made in Türkiye by the Ministry of National Education (MEB) with support from EU funds through a variety of programmes, such as Promoting Integration of Syrian Kids into the Turkish Education System (PIKTES)<sup>2</sup> and Conditional Cash Transfer for Education (CCTE)<sup>3</sup> (Baban et al. 2021). These programmes trained and employed 5,600 Turkish Language teachers to provide language support for 390,000 children and provided 30,000 students out of school with catch-up courses. Nevertheless, a growing body of literature suggests that teachers still struggle to communicate with and teach Syrian students due to the language barrier, compounded by a lack of resources and proper in-service training programmes and activities (Çelik and İçduygu 2019).

Similarly, refugee children in Australia face difficulty understanding English, which is the primary language of instruction. Children struggle to learn maths and science and read school texts in English because it is a language to which they have had little prior exposure. However, the "New Arrivals Programme" in Australia supports refugee students' English language learning and helps them access the Australian curriculum (Shuayb et al. 2023), which is followed by most state and territory schools, including independent and Catholic schools. In metropolitan areas, students from refugee backgrounds may initially enrol in specialist schools or attend special programmes within schools that offer a modified curriculum with literacy and intensive English language support (Sidhu et al. 2011). After one and a half years, students can transition to another learning environment without extra support based on their age and assessed readiness. They can even transfer to a regular school and integrate with their Australian peers while continuing to receive extra English language support.

Our literature review shows that recent research is focused on how the process of language learning is impacted by contextual factors such as classroom context,

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the PIKTES project, visit <https://piktes.gov.tr/Home/IndexENG> [accessed 10 February 2025].

<sup>3</sup> For more information on the CCTE programme, visit <https://www.unicef.org/turkiye/en/conditional-cash-transfer-education-ccte-programme-0> [accessed 10 February 2025].

social context and wider sociological context (Rokita-Jaśkow 2019). In what remains of this section, we present a comprehensive literature review that reveals the different micro, meso and macro factors that cause difficulties in foreign language acquisition.

### Micro-level determinants of language comprehension difficulties

Several studies indicate that gender is not a significant determinant of language comprehension difficulties (Ismail et al. 2018; van Tubergen 2010), but some have found a slight advantage for girls in this area (Korpilahti et al. 2016). However, refugees' post-traumatic experiences and difficulties settling in refugee camps certainly limit their ability to acquire the host country's language (Kartal et al. 2019). Research from different disciplines shows that a complex combination of variables determines success in language and literacy learning because it is embedded in the social fabric of homes and schools (Li 2006).

Parental knowledge and attitudes towards learning a foreign language influence adolescent preferences and motivation to learn a second language (Bartram 2006). Parents' educational background can also affect children's future learning. Highly educated parents are able to help their children in their learning process (Zhou 2020) as well as having more time and resources to invest in their children's education (Guryan et al. 2008). As for social context, there is an interplay between acquiring a host country's language and integration. In English-speaking countries like Australia, acquiring English language skills is crucial for new arrivals to be socially included (Due and Riggs 2009; Riggs and Due 2011), and lacking knowledge of a host country's language impedes the process of integration (Karabacak 2020; Elmeroth 2011). Hence, social contact is essential for refugees to learn and attain proficiency in the language of their host country (Szuber 2007). Furthermore, refugee children often take on the role of interpreters for their parents, a practice known as *language brokering* (Finlay et al. 2017; Jutorán and Vargas-Urpi 2022). While this can be a burden, it also has practical and cultural benefits, such as contributing to family settlement and functioning (Bauer 2016).

Furthermore, socioeconomic status and parental employment greatly influence children's aspirations (Rokita-Jaśkow 2019) and their capacity to acquire a new language (Dörnyei 2005). Parents' socioeconomic status is an important determinant of the family environment and of parents' ability to support their children, which makes it a significant predictor of students' school achievement. In addition to micro-level factors, the literature discusses a wide range of meso-level factors that contribute to shaping refugee students' language comprehension difficulties.

### Meso-level determinants of language comprehension difficulties

Language acquisition is also greatly determined by school factors. Mike Baynham (2006) argues that a supportive and safe classroom environment encourages students to participate in classroom activities and thus effectively learn a second language. Refugee youths' ability to interact using the host country's foreign language is determined by their relationship with their teachers, who can hold high aspirations for

them, provide them with special attention and leverage their cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Daniel and Zybina 2018; Karabacak 2020).

Another important factor in facilitating language acquisition revealed by the studies we reviewed is language training. Language training not only improves refugees' and migrants' foreign language skills but also helps them integrate into mainstream education (Due et al. 2015; Daniel and Zybina 2018). When refugees are isolated while receiving language support, they miss out on interaction with native speakers, thus diminishing their language learning opportunities (Elmeroth 2011). Liana Rose (2014) argues that English courses were not beneficial for Chechen refugees living in Roscommon in Ireland, especially at the beginning of their resettlement, since their basic human needs were not met. Instead, these refugees acquired the language outside the classroom in their local society, where they became well integrated and felt sufficiently independent that they planned to stay. Hence, socially integrating refugees improves their acquisition of a local foreign language, whether or not they are offered language training sessions.

According to a UNESCO report, using refugee children's native language in class enhances their ability to learn a second or third language, leading to improved learning outcomes (UNESCO 2020). Segregated schools could therefore facilitate refugee children's language acquisition until they join their peers in mainstream education (Morris-Lange and Schneider 2020). The language barrier is one of the biggest challenges Syrian students face in Turkish public schools, where Turkish is the primary language of instruction. On the other hand, in TECs, Arabic is the primary language of instruction, and the Turkish language is provided in parallel to prepare students for enrolment in mainstream education (Aras and Yasun 2016). The following section provides an overview of the literature that discusses macro-level factors which in turn shape factors at the micro and meso levels.

### Macro-level determinants of language comprehension difficulties

Policies play a crucial role in shaping refugees' language learning experience, since refugees' investment in learning the host country's language depends on their commitment to remaining in the host country (Mesch 2003). In a country that offers only a short-term settlement perspective, refugees may not be motivated to invest in learning the language since they are determined to leave as soon as this is safe, in contrast to refugees who plan to stay in a host country that offers them long-term settlement.

Some policies facilitate refugees' language learning. For example, before transitioning to Australian mainstream schools, new arrivals, including refugees, are expected to participate for one year in intensive English language programmes offered in 18 primary state schools across South Australia (Due et al. 2015). In Türkiye, a three-year plan was announced in April 2017 to integrate all Syrian refugee students into Turkish state schools. The plan offered intensive Turkish language training to children already registered in public schools to help them succeed, while students enrolled in TECs were gradually transferred to public schools (MEB 2016a, 2016b). The type of settlement (short-term vs. long-term) is crucial, because investing in learning a host country's language depends on the level of satisfaction with



the host community and, thus, the commitment to staying in the resettlement country (van Tubergen 2010).

Lebanon offers only short-term settlement for refugees. This is reflected in policies that restrict them from being integrated into society at all levels, which pushes Syrian refugees, for example, to repatriate.<sup>4</sup> Examples of structural factors that create insecurities for refugees in Lebanon and affect language learning and education include access to quality education, the adoption of multiple languages socially and educationally, and “political and economic issues of emigration and work permits” (Guillotte 2020, p. 72). Lebanon’s multilingual “language-in-education” policies form a structural barrier that hinders refugee students’ access to the Lebanese educational system and exacerbates educational inequities, making them less likely to succeed in formal education (*ibid.*). These policies are implemented unevenly in Lebanese public schools because some teachers use Arabic during their sessions to explain difficult concepts, while other teachers rely solely on foreign languages such as English and French. Refugee students often fail because they have difficulty expressing themselves or understanding concepts in a foreign language (Esseili 2017). Furthermore, multilingual language policies increase the dropout rate among disadvantaged students in Lebanon and decrease the enrolment rate in secondary schools where foreign languages are used as a medium of instruction (Shuayb 2016). Syrian refugees in upper primary and secondary grades in Lebanon therefore urgently need access to French and English language support.

## Methodology

Our research employed a mixed-methods approach. The quantitative analysis relies on a cross-sectional survey conducted in 2018 covering 945 middle school (grades 7 and 8) Syrian refugee students in Lebanon, Türkiye and Australia. The qualitative analysis relies on interviews conducted with students, parents, teachers and principals in the same three countries. The survey included several closed-ended questions about refugee children’s living conditions, household characteristics, socioeconomic status, and schooling experiences and outcomes. Furthermore, the interview questionnaire included several questions that provided an in-depth understanding of refugee children’s living and schooling experiences in the three host countries. This mixed-methods approach, with the survey data being enriched by interview insights, allowed us to develop a comprehensive understanding of the micro (individual, household, parental characteristics), meso (school practices) and macro (policy) determinants of refugees’ language comprehension difficulties.

In Lebanon, data collection targeted both morning and afternoon shifts in public schools. Most of the Lebanese sample (247 refugee students) was taken from the afternoon shift, given that the majority of Syrian refugees in Lebanon go to school in the afternoon. We covered four districts (Akkar, Greater Beirut, South and Beqaa) hosting the highest number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. In Türkiye, the sample

<sup>4</sup> This article was drafted in October 2024, i.e. before the fall of the Assad regime on 8 December 2024.



(357 refugee students) came from the two main districts (Gaziantep and Istanbul) hosting the highest number of Syrian refugees in Türkiye. Australia's sample (341 refugee students) covered state, Catholic and independent schools that enrol most refugee students in Australia, distributed across four main states (New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia and Victoria). Table 1 provides detailed information on the distribution of the students' surveys and interviews we conducted in each country.

## Limitations

In some cases, governmental permissions restricted our access to certain schools and regions. We were able to acquire permission to access Lebanese public schools from the Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE). However, their permission was granted conditionally for only a pre-selected list of schools. Furthermore, the lack of information on the geographical distribution of refugees in Lebanon favoured the convenience sampling method in our data collection process, which limits our ability to reach conclusions regarding our target population. Our mixed-methods approach nevertheless offers valuable insights into the determinants of foreign language comprehension difficulties among the refugee population.

## Empirical model

The empirical model we used in our study is based on our quantitative student survey. Our dependent variable "*language comprehension difficulty*" is a categorical variable based on an equally weighted index we constructed by relying on the following three Likert scale questions:

- (1) Do you face difficulties understanding the language of instruction in foreign language classes (English, French, Turkish)?
- (2) Do you face difficulties understanding the language of instruction in mathematics classes?

**Table 1** Total number of interviews and observations conducted, by country

	Lebanon	Türkiye	Australia	Total
Teacher interviews	46	12 FGDs involving 25 teachers	14	72
School principal interviews	15 (including 1 supervisor)	3	6	24
Parent (Syrian and non-Syrian) interviews	27 FGDs involving 117 parents	5 FGDs involving 30 parents	30	62
Students' quantitative survey	247	357	341	945

*Note:* FGD = focus group discussion

- (3) Do you face difficulties understanding the language of instruction in science classes (physics, chemistry, biology)?

Having constructed the index, we turn it into a categorical variable to fit our ordered Probit model presented below. Our dependent variable is therefore a categorical variable ranging from 1 to 3, where 1 indicates low language comprehension difficulty and 3 indicates high language comprehension difficulty.

The empirical model includes three distinct groups of explanatory variables. The first group includes a dummy variable for *gender* with a mean of 0.481, indicating that 48% of our respondents were male (Table 2). *Planned highest education* is a dummy variable that depicts students' aspirations. Our summary statistics reveal that 73% of our respondents were planning to attend university in the future. In addition, we include the categorical variable *struggle to pay bills* as an indicator of financial struggle, showing that 32% of our sampled refugee students reported that they always struggled to pay their bills. A dummy variable for *type of dwelling* is also included, showing that 82% of our respondents resided in a private apartment/house. Our categorical variable *neighbours mostly displaced people* shows that 45%

**Table 2** Summary statistics of variables

	# of observations	Mean	SD
<b>Dependent variable</b>			
Language comprehension difficulty	866	2.167	0.796
<b>Individual &amp; household factors</b>			
Gender	906	0.481	0.499
Planned highest education: <i>University</i>	914	0.728	0.444
Struggle to pay Bills: <i>Sometimes</i>	896	0.309	0.462
Struggle to pay bills: <i>Always</i>	896	0.32	0.466
Type of dwelling: <i>Private house/apartment</i>	914	0.819	0.384
Neighbours mostly displaced people: <i>Somewhat true</i>	879	0.235	0.424
Neighbours mostly displaced people: <i>True</i>	879	0.447	0.497
Father's education: <i>Post-secondary</i>	896	0.33	0.47
Mother's education: <i>Post-secondary</i>	893	0.217	0.412
Years in host country	914	3.712	2.272
<b>School factors</b>			
Friendly teachers: <i>Sometimes</i>	890	0.169	0.375
Friendly teachers: <i>Never</i>	890	0.066	0.248
Hours of language	911	7.265	6.638
Lebanon's morning shift	914	0.031	0.1753
Lebanon's afternoon shift	914	0.2111	0.4083
<b>Country of residence</b>			
Lebanon	914	0.242	0.429
Türkiye	914	0.39	0.488

of our participants resided in a neighbourhood with mostly displaced people. Furthermore, two dummy variables for parents' education reveal that 33% of respondents reported that their father held a post-secondary degree, while only 22% reported that their mother had completed a post-secondary degree. We also include a continuous variable for the number of years spent in the host country. Our data reveal that the average time our respondents had spent in their host country at the time of our study was 3.7 years.

The second group of explanatory variables includes the categorical variables: *friendly teachers* depicting student–teacher relationships and in-class practices. Our data reveal that only 7% reported that their teachers were never friendly. *Hours of language* is a continuous variable that shows the total number of language training hours received by the student per week, with the average number received by our respondents revealed to stand at approximately 7 hours per week. In addition, we include two dummy variables that represent the morning and afternoon shifts in Lebanon's public schools, revealing that 21% of our respondents were enrolled in the segregated afternoon shift while only 3% were enrolled in the morning shift.

The final set of explanatory variables includes dummy variables *Lebanon* and *Türkiye* that indicate the respondent's country of residence. Around 39% of our respondents resided in Türkiye, 24% in Lebanon, and 37% in Australia.

Our dependent variable *language comprehension difficulty* is a categorical variable. We therefore ran the regression below using an ordered probit model<sup>5</sup> to examine the determinants of refugee student language comprehension difficulty (LCD).

$$\Pr(LCD_i = 1, 2, 3) = \Phi(\beta_0 + \beta_1 IH_i + \beta_2 SF_i + \beta_3 R_i + u_i)$$

We used the following probit observation rule:

$$LCD = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if the student has low language comprehension difficulty} \\ 2 & \text{if the student has moderate language comprehension difficulty} \\ 3 & \text{if the student has high language comprehension difficulty} \end{cases}$$

$LCD_i$  is a categorical ordered dependent variable based on our language comprehension difficulty index.  $IH_i$  is the vector of variables representing individual and household factors.  $SF_i$  is a vector of variables representing school factors, and  $R_i$  is the vector of variables representing the student's country of residence.  $\Phi$  depicts the cumulative standard normal distribution function. Finally,  $\beta_0$ ,  $\beta_1$ ,  $\beta_2$  and  $\beta_3$  are vectors of individual parameters to be estimated, and  $u_i$  is the error term to be normally distributed. We ran different specifications of the above model, as illustrated in Table 3. These specifications allowed us to observe how the significance of micro and meso factors changes after controlling for macro factors (country fixed effect dummies), and to check how the significance of those macro factors changes as we gradually control for micro and meso factors.

<sup>5</sup> *Ordered probit* is a type of regression where the dependent variable is a categorical ordered variable, i.e. can have more than two outcomes (Greene and Hensher 2010).

**Table 3** Determinants of language comprehension difficulty (ordered probit model)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
<b>Individual &amp; household factors</b>						
Gender	0.040 (0.082)	0.019 (0.083)	0.024 (0.083)	-0.000 (0.084)	0.000 (0.084)	0.018 (0.084)
Planned highest education: <i>University</i>	-0.547*** (0.099)	-0.477*** (0.102)	-0.558*** (0.100)	-0.485*** (0.103)	-0.485*** (0.104)	-0.498*** (0.104)
Struggle to pay bills: <i>Sometimes</i>	0.294*** (0.104)	0.274** (0.106)	0.291*** (0.105)	0.273** (0.108)	0.271** (0.108)	0.261** (0.108)
Struggle to pay bills: <i>Always</i>	0.294*** (0.102)	0.333*** (0.106)	0.275*** (0.103)	0.316*** (0.109)	0.315*** (0.109)	0.309*** (0.109)
Type of dwelling: <i>Private house/apartment</i>	-0.588*** (0.116)	-0.491*** (0.123)	-0.602*** (0.117)	-0.494*** (0.124)	-0.494*** (0.124)	-0.513*** (0.124)
Neighbours mostly displaced people: <i>Somewhat true</i>	-0.088 (0.111)	-0.121 (0.112)	-0.095 (0.112)	-0.133 (0.113)	-0.133 (0.113)	-0.116 (0.114)
Neighbours mostly displaced people: <i>True</i>	0.311*** (0.100)	0.292*** (0.102)	0.316*** (0.101)	0.293*** (0.104)	0.292*** (0.104)	0.314*** (0.104)
Father's education: <i>Post-secondary</i>	0.007 (0.104)	-0.031 (0.107)	-0.009 (0.105)	-0.045 (0.108)	-0.046 (0.109)	-0.071 (0.109)
Mother's education: <i>Post-secondary</i>	0.057 (0.120)	0.045 (0.120)	0.080 (0.121)	0.071 (0.122)	0.070 (0.122)	0.070 (0.122)
Years in host country						-0.103*** (0.028)
<b>School factors</b>						
Friendly teachers: <i>Sometimes</i>			0.009 (0.111)	0.024 (0.111)	0.024 (0.111)	0.030 (0.111)
Friendly teachers: <i>Never</i>			0.380** (0.172)	0.433** (0.174)	0.431** (0.174)	0.442** (0.174)

**Table 3** (continued)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Hours of language			0.004 (0.006)	0.002 (0.006)	0.002 (0.006)	0.003 (0.006)
Lebanon's morning shift					-0.398 (0.252)	
Lebanon's afternoon shift					-0.351 *** (0.125)	
<b>Country of residence</b>						
Lebanon		-0.338 *** (0.118)		-0.357 *** (0.121)		0.113 (0.177)
Türkiye		-0.178 (0.112)		-0.197* (0.115)	-0.197* (0.115)	0.006 (0.128)
Observations	801	801	789	789	789	789

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. Statistical significance \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

## Results

This section presents the determinants of refugee students' language comprehension difficulties based on our quantitative and qualitative analysis of micro, meso and macro-level factors. On the micro level, we probe into the impact of individual, household, and parental characteristics on refugee students' language comprehension difficulties. On the meso level, the analysis focuses on different school practices related to language support, in-class practices, educational integration, and their impact on refugee students' language comprehension difficulties. Macro-level policies usually shape these practices, so our macro-level analysis aims to reveal whether refugee students' language comprehension difficulty varies due to differences in provisions implemented under different legal frameworks in Lebanon, Türkiye and Australia. In each of the sections below, we start by presenting our quantitative analysis based on the findings listed in Table 3 and subsequently present our qualitative findings.

### Micro-level determinants of refugee students' language comprehension

Our results reveal that gender and parents' education do not seem to be significant determinants of language comprehension difficulty among refugee students. On the other hand, we did find that educational aspirations, financial struggles, social segregation and duration of residence in the host country are significant determinants of refugee students' language comprehension difficulty.

For instance, refugee students who are planning to complete a university degree are less likely to have significant language comprehension difficulties, at a 1% significance level. We also found financial struggle to be a significant determinant of refugees' language comprehension difficulty. Our results show that refugee students who always struggle to pay their bills are more likely to face significant language comprehension difficulties, at a 1% significance level. In contrast, students residing in private houses or apartments are less likely to face such difficulties at a 1% significance level. As might be expected, there is a positive association between refugee students who are socially segregated and language comprehension difficulty. Students residing in neighbourhoods with mostly displaced people are more likely to have language comprehension difficulties, at a 1% significance level. Moreover, an inverse relationship exists between language comprehension difficulty and the number of years spent in the host country. Refugee children who had a longer residency period in the host country are less likely to face high language comprehension difficulties, at a 1% significance level.

Our qualitative findings further support these quantitative findings, revealing similar patterns in factors such as educational aspirations, financial struggles, private housing, social segregation, and the number of years spent in a host country. For example, according to some interviewees, many refugee students who aspired to continue their education worked hard to improve their performance and managed to succeed even in

subjects taught in a foreign language. Higher aspiration levels helped them adapt to the host country's curriculum and overcome language-related challenges.

"I have three [Syrian] students who are really hardworking even though they do not understand Turkish very well ... they overcame their language problems" (teacher, Türkiye).<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, we found parents' educational background and parental encouragement to be essential determinants for facilitating children's foreign language acquisition. However, many Syrian parents reported being unable to help their children for several reasons, including differences in the curriculum taught in the host country.

"I cannot help my daughter in grade 7. All the subjects are in English. She asks for my help, but I do not have answers to her questions" (parent, Lebanon).

"Most refugee parents are quite engaged in their child's education, but language can be a barrier sometimes" (teacher, Australia).

Even if the parents were educated, some still struggled to explain subjects taught in a foreign language. In addition to the language barrier, some parents did not have time to help their children with their homework due to long working hours.

Some interviewees shared that living in crowded houses affected their children's ability to focus on their studies. We found financial struggle to be another factor that affects refugee students' foreign language acquisition. Many refugee parents living in Lebanon stated that they were unable to afford the cost of hiring a private tutor or registering their children in language support courses.

"Private tutors cost a lot of money ... I do not expect that other parents can afford to hire tutors for their children to learn the English language" (parent, Lebanon).

Furthermore, our qualitative data revealed that refugees' foreign language acquisition highly depends on their social integration and vice versa. For example, some of the teachers we interviewed in Türkiye reported that integration greatly improved Syrians' Turkish language skills. A few interviewees noted that Syrians of Kurdish origin had developed their Turkish language abilities through living and interacting with locals. Social integration therefore lessens the difficulty of foreign language acquisition.

"I find it [integration] beneficial in terms of language development ... They can improve their languages when they spend time together" (teacher, Türkiye).

Social integration was also impacted by the duration of residence. Some interviewees reported that, with time, refugees' and locals' relationships had improved, which enhanced refugee students' foreign language acquisition. According to several

<sup>6</sup> We conducted our interviews in Arabic and translated participant statements into English for the purposes of this article.



participants we interviewed in Türkiye and Lebanon, refugee students who had registered in primary grade levels and spent years learning and practising their host country's foreign language struggled less in intermediate grade levels. Conversely, newly arrived refugee students who registered directly in middle-level classes faced difficulties acquiring the host country's language.

In addition to micro-level factors, meso-level factors played a key role in determining the extent to which refugee students found it challenging to comprehend and use the language of instruction.

## **Meso-level determinants of refugee students' language comprehension**

At the meso level, our results revealed that the student–teacher relationship is a significant determinant of refugee students' language comprehension difficulties. When teachers are never friendly, students are more likely to face language comprehension difficulties compared to when teachers are always friendly, at a 1% significance level. Although several studies stress the importance of providing refugee students with language training (Daniel and Zybina 2018; Due et al. 2015), our results show no significant association between the number of hours of language training received and language comprehension difficulty. This could be attributed to two main causes. First, a significant percentage of respondents in our sample reported that they were socially segregated in neighbourhoods with mostly displaced people, which, according to Elisabeth Elmeroth (2011), could have diminished their language acquisition abilities despite receiving language support. Second, a significant percentage of respondents in our sample reported that they struggled financially. According to Rose (2014), language support becomes ineffective when refugee children's basic needs are not met.

Our results also indicate that the type of schooling is a significant determinant of refugees' language comprehension difficulties. Students segregated in Lebanon's afternoon shift are less likely to face high language comprehension difficulties than students enrolled in Australian state schools, at a 1% significance level. In contrast, we observed no significant difference between those enrolled in Lebanon's morning shift and those in Australian public schools. The special educational provisions provided to refugee students in the afternoon shift (segregated schooling) go a long way towards explaining their lower language comprehension difficulty, as we reveal later in this section.

In line with the quantitative results, our qualitative data reveal that many refugee students in all three countries surveyed struggled to understand teachers' instructions and explanations because they were taught in foreign languages.

“In our classes, they have been having real difficulties in learning Turkish and social studies” (teacher, Türk iye).

“They struggle with languages since they studied everything in Arabic back in Syria. Especially maths, physics, chemistry and biology. They have to study these subjects in English here” (principal, Lebanon).

Many teachers interviewed who taught the afternoon shift in Lebanese schools shared that they used Arabic to explain difficult concepts and terminologies to students. Such adjustments were necessary to help students succeed in all subjects taught in foreign languages.

“Some of my [Syrian] students have been studying in Lebanon for five years now but still have difficulty understanding French. If I don’t explain the exam questions, more than half of them will fail because they don’t understand the language” (teacher, Lebanon).

In addition, our interviews revealed that language training was offered to refugees in all three countries to strengthen their language skills. Turkish language sessions differed in length from one school to another, ranging between 4 and 6 hours per week. Several teachers noted that Syrian students in Turkish public schools were pulled out of maths classes during the day to improve their Turkish language acquisition. Language support was also provided to students in some Turkish schools through PIKTES projects.

In Australia, specific schools for learning English enrol refugees to help them understand the language and advance in it. According to several teachers who were interviewed, English support programmes such as English as Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) are offered between 1.5 and 4 hours per week. Students were pulled out of classes to receive these support sessions.

In Lebanon, some interviewees reported that Syrian students had received remedial classes in previous years, including language classes. Other interviewees shared that the Lebanese public school afternoon shift offered fewer language hours than the morning shift, which prevented refugees from learning the foreign language quickly. Some respondents stated that there was no time to provide extra sessions for Syrian students attending the afternoon shift. Despite all the language training provided, many interviewees in all three countries shared that refugee students needed more language support sessions to overcome the language barrier.

Our findings at the meso level reveal that foreign language comprehension difficulties vary significantly based on the type of schooling and educational provision, both of which are greatly shaped by macro-level factors that we present in the next section.

## Macro-level determinants of refugee students’ language comprehension

Before controlling for years of residence in the host country, both country dummies (*Lebanon* and *Türkiye*) that depict the type of settlement indicated that refugee students residing in Lebanon and Türkiye were less likely to face language comprehension difficulties compared to students residing in Australia, at a 1% significance level. However, after controlling for meso-level factors in column 6 of Table 3 (complete model), our country dummies, *Lebanon* and *Türkiye*, became insignificant, indicating no significant difference in language

comprehension difficulty between students residing in Lebanon and Türkiye compared to students residing in Australia. In other words, the effect of years of residence was statistically dominant to the extent that it made the role of the type of settlement (permanent vs. temporary) insignificant in the model. This is consistent with the findings of other studies revealing that a longer stay in the host country leads to greater gains in foreign language skills (Serranno 2012; Miglietta and Tartaglia 2009).

Although our quantitative findings show no significant difference in language comprehension difficulty at the macro level, our qualitative results do suggest that factors at the macro level impact refugee students' language comprehension. For instance, educational provision is shaped by the host country's educational policies. Based on the reports of several interviewees, the double shift system in Lebanon allowed refugee students enrolled in the afternoon shift to have lessons explained in Arabic. This lessened the difficulty of subjects such as science and maths, yet the students still needed support in the foreign language subjects.

While Lebanon's provision does not include language support programmes, Türkiye offers refugees language support through the PIKTES project. Similarly, in Australia, refugee students receive language support through different programmes and schools, yet according to some teachers, several students still need more time and support to acquire English. Moreover, macro-level factors such as residency and work legislation are crucial determinants of refugees' socioeconomic conditions. For instance, refugees in Lebanon are banned from working in specific fields such as law, medicine and engineering and thus are obliged to work for a low, unstable salary.

"As an engineer, I'm not allowed to work in this country. As you know, whether it's the engineering and/or medical or legal profession, they're not allowed to work in Lebanon" (Syrian parent, Lebanon).

Refugee parents' low socioeconomic status prevents them from hiring private tutors for their children or registering them in extra language support programmes. Furthermore, some students were forced to work during the academic year to support their families in Lebanon. Those students struggle to focus on their studies, which increases their language comprehension difficulties.

Several refugee parents in Lebanon expressed their struggle to feel integrated and find stability in a host society that continuously calls for their repatriation. In contrast, many of our interviewed refugees in Türkiye and Australia reported planning to stay in these countries. In the case of Australia, most of our interviewees reported that they possessed a permanent residency permit. Unlike in Lebanon, almost all participants in Australia appreciated the stability and the welcoming environment in which they found themselves. Refugee parents residing in Türkiye also reported that they had a temporary protection identity (ID) card, and none of them had experienced difficulties obtaining it. This shows that macro-level policies affect not only the quality of years spent in host countries but also refugees' daily life and their sense of belonging. These factors can either mitigate or exacerbate refugee children's integration levels and language comprehension difficulties.

## Conclusion

In this article, we examined the determinants of refugee students' language comprehension difficulties in Lebanon, Türkiye and Australia. The different types of legal settlement offered to refugees in each country allowed us to investigate whether language comprehension difficulties differ with different types of legal settlement. Our analysis is based on a survey of 945 middle school Syrian refugee students along with interviews conducted with teachers, parents and school principals from Lebanon, Türkiye and Australia.

Our comprehensive analysis of the determinants of refugee students' language comprehension difficulties reveals a complex interplay between micro, meso and macro factors. Educational aspirations, financial struggles, social segregation and duration of residence in the host country emerged as significant determinants of refugee children's language comprehension difficulties. Moreover, our results revealed that, while language comprehension difficulties diminish over the years, the precarious socioeconomic situation of refugee families remains a threat to academic achievement and predictor of dropout in the long run. This highlights the multifaceted nature of refugee education and the need for a more comprehensive approach to language inclusion in refugee education (Reddick and Chopra 2023).

Moving to the meso level, the significance of the student–teacher relationship and the type of schooling demonstrates the importance of educational practices in determining language comprehension difficulty. Students segregated in Lebanon's afternoon shift were less likely to face high language comprehension difficulties compared to students enrolled in Australian public schools. In Lebanese schools, teachers can explain coursework and exams in Arabic, which mitigates language comprehension difficulties in French or English. Furthermore, despite not finding any significant association between the number of hours of language training received and language comprehension difficulty, our qualitative data shed light on the importance of special learning provisions, language support programmes and the role of teachers in surmounting foreign language comprehension difficulties. The lack of correlation between hours of language training and language comprehension difficulties experienced by refugee children could be attributed to the high percentage of refugees in our sample who were either socially segregated or struggling financially. Both factors lessen the effectiveness of language support, as discussed in the literature (Szuber 2007; Rokita-Jaśkow 2019). Our analysis of meso-level factors reveals a high degree of interdependence between school factors, socioeconomic factors and policy frameworks. This compels us to adopt a holistic approach that encompasses institutional factors and addresses the different dimensions of refugees' livelihoods when assisting refugees with their education and language comprehension difficulties.

On the macro level, we found that the duration spent in the host country is more significant in predicting language comprehension difficulties than the type of legal settlement offered by the host country. This finding is echoed by other research studies (Serranno 2012; Miglietta and Tartaglia 2009). In contrast, our qualitative findings indicate that the type of legal settlement does influence the language comprehension

difficulties encountered by refugee students by shaping the country's educational policies, residency regulations and employment legislation, which can, in turn, impact micro-level factors like socioeconomic conditions and meso-level factors such as educational provision.

The significance of residency and work legislation underscores the broader socio-economic context in which refugee children navigate language comprehension difficulties. Educational policies, such as the double shift system in Lebanon and the availability of language support programmes in Türkiye and Australia, further emphasise the influence of macro-level factors on refugee students' language challenges and the need for a comprehensive approach that addresses distinct dimensions of refugees' livelihoods if we are to address refugee children's foreign language comprehension difficulties effectively. This builds on the findings of other research studies that also reveal the complexity of language and literacy and their embeddedness in the overall picture of children's lives (Li 2006).

The findings of this study emphasise the need for host countries to develop educational policies and practices that support continuous learning and adaptability for refugee children. Educational provisions must evolve to meet the diverse learning, linguistic and cultural needs of refugee students, incorporating language support and special learning provisions to help non-native speakers overcome language barriers. Additionally, lifelong learning frameworks directed towards refugees should incorporate support structures that address broader issues such as financial hardship and social segregation, which are often exacerbated under EiE. Addressing such challenges would allow children to focus on their educational goals and pursue continuous personal and professional development without being hindered by external challenges.

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**Ethics approval and participant consent** Data collection for this study was ethically approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Lebanese American University, and all survey participants under the age of 18 were required to have parental/guardian consent in order to participate. In addition to anonymising participants' identities, the researchers also ensured that the survey was carried out in conditions that allowed privacy while at the same time ensuring the safety of the participant and the researcher. Moreover, all researchers involved in the project were required to complete a Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) Program ethical training course.

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