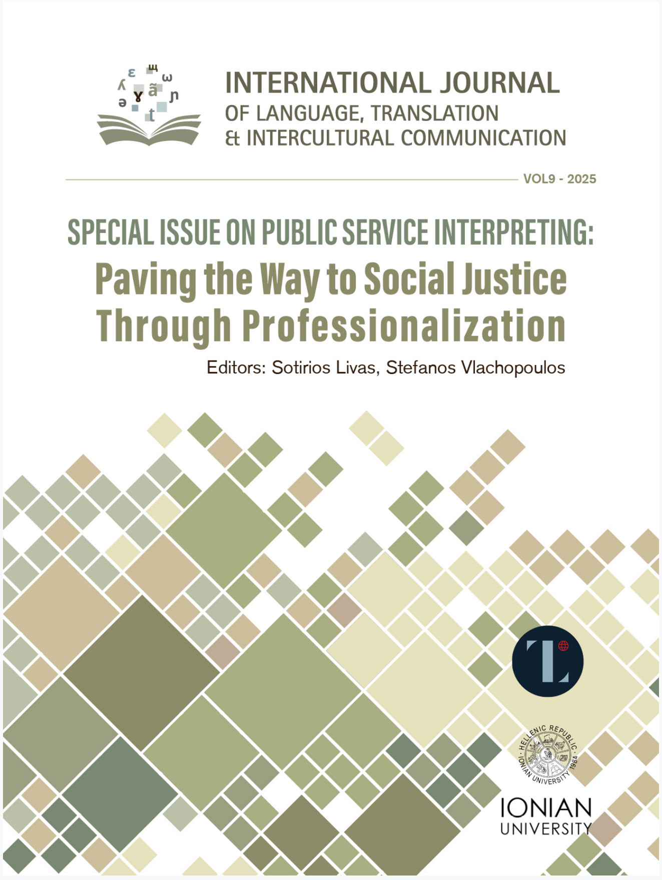
International Journal of Language, Translation and Intercultural Communication

Vol 9 (2025)

Public Service Interpreting: Paving the Way to Social Justice Through Professionalization (Special Issue)



A mixed-method approach to assessing intercultural communication needs

Stavros Kozobolis

doi: [10.12681/ijltic.41837](https://doi.org/10.12681/ijltic.41837)

A mixed-method approach to assessing intercultural communication needs: The case of public service interpreting in asylum contexts

Stavros Kozobolis
Ionian University
kozompolis@ionio.gr

Abstract

This article focuses on examining the research methods used to evaluate intercultural communication needs in two research projects conducted between 2022 and 2024. The first, the Erasmus+ project titled "ReTrans Project: Working with Interpreters in Refugee Transit Zones: Capacity building and awareness-raising for higher education contexts", in which DFLTI[1] participated as a partner, focused on developing digital training materials to raise awareness of interpreting in humanitarian and transborder migration contexts. The second, "Activities Arising from the Partnership Agreement with the Department of Foreign Languages, Translation and Interpreting of Ionian University", was part of the Project "Enhancing and building-up national capacity of migration and asylum strategic planning" (Pre-defined project 3), funded by the EEA Financial Mechanism 2014-2021, and aimed to design a robust accreditation system for public service interpreters in Greece.
This article summarizes and evaluates the methodologies employed in both projects. Although similar, each project approached the collection of data and its analysis from different perspectives. To this end, the main aim of the article is to reach safe conclusions on best practices for research related to public service interpreting.

***Keywords**: public service interpreting, needs assessment, beneficiaries, asylum services, mixed-methods approach*

1 Introduction

Public Service Interpreting (PSI) has been a topic of significant debate in Greece over the years, particularly regarding its role in supporting displaced populations. The term PSI encompasses "interpreting in public services to facilitate communication between staff and lay people meeting for a specific purpose" (Wadensjo, 1998:49). Describing situations involving the forced displacement of people is very challenging, as they are linked to political, economic, and social developments. This is especially true in a country like Greece, which is geographically close to regions that are frequently at war (e.g., the Middle East) or experiencing violent socio-economic changes (e.g., Afghanistan).

Given this context, this article focuses on the methodological approaches used in two research projects and proposes a mixed-methods approach to examine a series of crucial aspects related to PSI. The projects under review are the following:

- the Erasmus+ project *ReTrans Project: Working with Interpreters in Refugee Transit Zones: Capacity building and awareness-raising for higher education contexts*, which was carried out between 2022 and 2024, and
- the project *Activities Arising from the Partnership Agreement with the Department of Foreign Languages, Translation and Interpreting of Ionian University*, which was part of the project *Enhancing and building-up national capacity of migration and asylum strategic planning (Pre-defined project 3)*, funded by the EEA Financial Mechanism 2014-2021 and carried out between 2023 and 2024.

[1] Department of Foreign Languages, Translation and Interpreting, Ionian University, Greece.

The following chapter outlines the two projects, focusing particularly on the methodologies employed, while the third chapter summarizes the conclusions drawn from the application of the mixed-methods approach.

2 Evaluating intercultural communication needs

This chapter provides a more detailed overview of the two projects examined in this article, with particular emphasis on the sources from which data were collected and the methodologies employed.

2.1 The case of *ReTrans Project*

The *ReTrans Project*, which was conducted between 2022 and 2024, aimed to raise awareness about interpreting in humanitarian and transborder migration contexts by providing sustainable digital materials and educational tools for students and teachers in higher education interpreter institutions. Project partners from five different countries located along European migration routes[2] collaborated to address the needs of those working in transit zones and to improve the provision of language services. The training resources created, which are based on authentic experiences, game-based learning, and media education, are freely accessible[3].

To evaluate intercultural communication needs, the project's first work package (WP1) focused on the design, dissemination, and analysis of a multilingual questionnaire[4]. The drafting of the questionnaire was particularly challenging, as it had to be developed in five languages, i.e., English, German, Greek, Slovenian, and Macedonian[5]. The process can be roughly divided into three phases, each of which is briefly outlined below: original drafting and pre-testing, translation and backtranslation, and dissemination and analysis.

2.1.1 Original drafting

The initial phase of the multilingual questionnaire involved the drafting of the original version in English, which served as the shared language of communication among project partners, followed by the first round of its pre-testing. DFLTI led the drafting process through a research team composed of interpreting students and faculty members. The main objective of the questionnaire was twofold (Kozobolis & Pasch, 2023:91-92):

- to map the attitudes, opinions, and practices of stakeholders involved in interpreter-mediated encounters with refugees, such as governmental and non-governmental organizations (stakeholders)
- to understand the challenges faced in interpreting services during interactions between beneficiaries (refugees) and stakeholders

To facilitate accurate translations, the drafting team avoided complex language and syntax. The questionnaire was structured into four thematic sections (TS), which addressed the following issues: respondent profiling, language needs and interpreting service provision,

[2] The *ReTrans Project* was coordinated by the University of Vienna, while the University of Maribor in Slovenia, the Ionian University in Greece, the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, North Macedonia, and the University for Continuing Education Krems in Austria participated as partner universities.
[3] The official website of the *ReTrans Project* is available at: https://www.retrans-interpreting.com/
[4] The challenges of designing the multilingual questionnaire are discussed in more detail in Kozobolis & Pasch (2023:89-98).
[5] All language versions of the questionnaire can be found in Kozobolis et al. (2022).

stakeholders' perception of interpreting as a professional activity, and challenges for future improvements.

The first TS contained questions about the respondents' profiles and work experience. Specifically, the research team focused on the respondents' country and public service sector, their experience in working with refugees, and whether they had received any specific training related to working with refugees and/or interpreters.

The second TS focused on language needs and interpreting models used during interpreter-mediated encounters. The research team sought answers on refugees' countries of origin and the languages they speak, as well as on how interpreting services are delivered, i.e., whether interpreters are briefed before or after assignment, whether they follow professional guidelines (e.g., note-taking, punctuality) and so on.

The third TS examined stakeholder perceptions of interpreters. This section explored whether interpreters are employed on a permanent basis, whether there is a shortage of interpreters and other related issues.

The fourth TS contained an open-ended question inviting the stakeholders to elaborate on challenges and suggest potential improvements.

The initial English draft of the questionnaire consisted of 33 questions: 32 closed-ended and one open-ended, ensuring both quantitative and qualitative data collection. The draft was presented at the project's kick-off meeting in Vienna in May 2022. During this first pre-testing phase, national teams proposed refinements to improve its clarity and coherence. These suggestions were critically evaluated and implemented as appropriate.

2.1.2 Translation, back-translation, and finalization of the questionnaire

The second phase of the multilingual questionnaire drafting involved the translation of the master English questionnaire into German, Greek, Slovenian, and Macedonian. To ensure unbiased results, the research team assigned the translation task to independent translators, namely either translation and interpreting students or professional translators not involved in the project.

To verify translation accuracy and maintain both linguistic and conceptual equivalence, a back-translation process was also implemented. In this process, the four translated versions were back-translated into English by separate, independent translators. This step helped the research team identify discrepancies between the original and the translated versions and detect and correct errors before dissemination.

Following the back-translation phase, a second round of pre-testing was conducted. This involved communication with the national teams to discuss, clarify, and correct any unclear points. The aim was to ensure consistency and clarity across all language versions.

The five finalized versions were uploaded to LimeSurvey, an online, secure and user-friendly survey tool[6] provided by the University of Vienna. Its multilingual functionality enabled the simultaneous management of all language versions of the questionnaire, with

[6] You can find more about the tool at: https://www.limesurvey.org/.

answer options automatically adapted into the project languages. However, some of the automated translations were inaccurate or awkwardly phrased, requiring manual review and correction by the national teams.

To address these issues, a third and final round of pre-testing was conducted (Kozobolis & Pasch, 2023:94). Each national team reviewed their respective language version to identify potential typographical errors and unclear wording. Corrections were then implemented through communication via email and virtual meetings, ensuring that all versions were clear prior to full dissemination.

2.1.3 Dissemination and analysis

After the final round of pre-testing and its finalization, the questionnaire was distributed to stakeholders in the field, including NGOs, public service institutions, and other relevant organizations (Kozobolis & Pasch, 2023:94-95). Each team was responsible for disseminating its language version within its country. To maximize outreach, the snowball sampling technique was employed, allowing initial recipients to forward the questionnaire to other stakeholders, who can be considered a hidden population that cannot be accessed easily (Mellinger & Hasan, 2016:13).

The survey remained open for six weeks, with two follow-up reminders sent to encourage participation. The reminders were managed by the national teams within their respective regions. After the survey period, 64 valid responses were collected, which provided insights into language combinations, interpreter roles, best practices, and ethical challenges in interpreter-mediated encounters.

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS statistical software by the Greek research team, while responses to the open-ended question were compiled into a corpus and analyzed qualitatively. The Greek national team, which was the leader of WP1, sent a summary document to each national team, outlining country-specific results presented in tables and charts. Then, each national team drafted individual country reports following predefined formatting guidelines. The final report, which included all findings, was compiled by the Greek team, reviewed by all partners, and is freely accessible on the *ReTrans Project's* website (Kozobolis et. al., 2022).

2.2 The case of *Activities Arising from the Partnership Agreement with the DFLTI*

This project, funded by the EEA Financial Mechanism 2014-2021, centered on examining interpreting services in the Greek public sector, focusing primarily on asylum seekers and immigrants. Its core objective was to enhance public service interpreting by creating a national register in Greece (Vlachopoulos et al., 2023). To implement the project, DFLTI collaborated with the Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum (MOMA).

The second work package (WP2) of the project focused on assessing the provision of interpreting services in asylum and immigration settings (Vlachopoulos et al., 2023:155-156). Specifically, the research team employed both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine PSI in Greece. Quantitative data were obtained from official ministerial reports on migration patterns, asylum applications, and demographic trends among asylum seekers. In addition, a questionnaire was compiled and distributed to relevant public service institutions to evaluate interpreting needs. Finally, qualitative insights were collected through interviews with officials involved in asylum-related services, offering a deeper understanding of the challenges and requirements of PSI. The following subchapters discuss in more detail the data sources used in the study.

2.2.1 Quantitative data

Quantitative data were drawn from two sources, the official monthly reports of MOMA and a questionnaire designed by the research team.

First, data covering the first four months of 2023, i.e., the period preceding the official launch of the project, were retrieved from the official website of MOMA (Hellenic Republic Ministry of Migration & Asylum, n.d.) to capture the situation at that time. The data provided invaluable insights into the origin, gender, and age groups of asylum seekers in Greece. The findings of the analysis, which was conducted using SPSS software, were very interesting, revealing, among others, that the primary countries of origin of asylum seekers in Greece included Pakistan, Afghanistan, Palestine, Syria, India, Iraq, Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, and Georgia. In addition, a significant gender imbalance was observed, with a higher proportion of male asylum seekers. Finally, the data revealed that the majority of asylum seekers in Greece were aged between 18 and 34, a demographic group more likely to migrate due to political instability or economic reasons.

The second data source was a questionnaire, designed solely in Greek and distributed to Greek public service institutions involved in migration and asylum policy. Its aim was to assess the needs and challenges faced by public service employees who work with interpreters in asylum-related contexts, and to identify existing gaps in interpreting services and areas requiring improvement. The questionnaire contained both closed-ended and open-ended questions to provide both statistical data and qualitative insights. It comprised 31 questions and was structured into five key thematic sections (TS).

The first TS contained questions about the profile of the respondents, focusing on their years of experience and their education on communicating with beneficiaries (asylum seekers, unaccompanied minors, etc.).

The second TS sought to collect data on language needs. More specifically, the research team focused on the countries of origin of the beneficiaries, the language(s) that are frequently used, etc.

The third TS examined the collaboration between public servants and interpreters, exploring whether public servants inform interpreters about the case they will be interpreting before it begins, provide them with feedback at the end of the process, the challenges they face, and whether interpreters receive psychological support after a traumatic event.

The fourth TS focuses on the modes through which interpreting is usually conducted and the professionalism of interpreters (e.g., punctuality, impartiality, note-taking), while the fifth TS centers on public servants' opinions about interpreters, focusing on trust, the quality of interpreting, and suggestions for improving services. This section also includes the only open-ended question, which is related to any suggestions for improvements.

The structure of the questionnaire was deliberately kept as simple as possible to ensure accessibility and ease of completion, recognizing the time constraints faced by respondents. For this reason, as mentioned above, the majority of questions were closed-ended. Finally, the questionnaire was not pre-tested, as the research team deemed it unnecessary.

These choices proved effective, as a high response rate was achieved, providing invaluable insights into PSI in Greece. Specifically, the questionnaire was carefully disseminated to 25 public services involved in asylum issues, receiving 16 answers after two rounds of dissemination.

2.2.2 Qualitative data

Finally, the research team conducted five in-depth, semi-structured interviews with employees involved in asylum-related services. The discussions focused on three main areas:

- Interpreting challenges: Identifying difficulties faced by public service employees when working with interpreters, including linguistic accuracy, ethical concerns, and procedural inefficiencies.
- Organizational perspective: Understanding how different institutions manage interpreting services and whether standardized protocols exist.
- Improvements in PSI: Exploring potential strategies for enhancing interpreter training, accreditation, and overall service quality.

The interviews proved very helpful, as their analysis led the research team to very interesting conclusions regarding the views of public servants, such as the following:

- Changing interpreting providers results in service inconsistency and reduced quality of services.
- Official agents and employees tend to prefer local providers, as they can be more responsive to changes and emergencies than providers based abroad. This affects planning and reduces flexibility in addressing emergencies.
- In-person interpreting can be more effective under certain conditions. However, remote interpreting services become crucial when interpreters with a rare language combination are not available locally.

2.3 Key findings and proposal of an official accreditation system for PSI

The quantitative and qualitative data gathered from the monthly ministerial reports, questionnaire responses, and interviews were analyzed to enable the research team to develop a comprehensive view of intercultural communication needs in PSI.

As far as key findings are concerned, the study highlighted some critical deficiencies in PSI within Greek asylum services. The first major issue was the shortage of qualified interpreters for several language combinations. In addition, many interpreters lacked formal training, a result that raises serious concerns about accuracy and professionalism in asylum cases.

Another significant, though expected, finding was the absence of a standardized accreditation system for interpreters in public services. Without official certification requirements, the quality of interpreting services varied significantly, putting the success of the provision of services at risk. Thus, the establishment of an accreditation framework was deemed necessary. To handle this issue, the research team proposed, as part of another work package of the project, the development of a formal accreditation system for public service interpreters. Although not the subject of the present article, this accreditation system is quite rigorous and has been discussed in detail in other articles produced by members of the research team (see Ioannidis, 2025).

Finally, public institutions should implement standardized procedures for working with interpreters. Some of these procedures, according to the results of the analysis, include pre-session briefings, post-session evaluations, and counseling services for psychological support.

These measures can enhance the overall efficiency and quality of asylum-related interpreting services.

3 Towards a mixed-methods approach for assessing asylum-related interpreting needs

In the previous chapter, we outlined aspects of two projects in which the DFLTI of Ionian University participated between 2022 and 2024, both of which dealt with PSI in asylum contexts. This chapter aims to compare the methodology used in both projects for data collection and analysis, and to summarize good practices on drafting and conducting such research. More specifically, the comparison centers on the following points of interest:

- Quantitative data collection: Multilingual and monolingual specialized questionnaire drafting

As Mathiyazhagan and Nandan (2010:40) aptly note, the "design of a questionnaire is generally an art rather than science". Indeed, questionnaires are often the first and most critical stage of research. Any mistake or misleading formulation can compromise data collection or even lead potential participants to abandon a survey. The task becomes much more complex when research requires the drafting of multilingual questionnaires. In such cases, where the risk of failure is higher, the drafting team, which often comprises researchers from different countries and language backgrounds, resembles the drafting teams found in the European Union's institutions. Indeed, the drafting procedure of the *ReTrans Project's* questionnaire resembled the procedures often followed in EU bodies (see Robinson, 2005; Sosoni, 2012). An initial draft is drafted in the lingua franca, i.e., English, and then it is discussed and revised multiple times through collaborative discussions before reaching its final version. In such contexts, translation is an inherent part of the process, while the final document is a linguistic hybrid, as it carries marks from various mother tongues and cultures (Schäffner, 1997).

Drafting multilingual questionnaires is demanding and difficult. The team must work in a shared language –typically English– which is often not their mother tongue, while having to be precise in expressing delicate concepts. The *ReTrans Project* highlighted some serious problems and misunderstandings that can arise during this process (see Kozobolis & Pasch, 2023:93). To handle these problems, two practices emerged as crucial when drafting a specialized multilingual questionnaire. The first is back-translation, which is a particularly useful technique as it helps researchers detect minor and major problems during the drafting stage. The second is that, just like EU drafting, multilingual questionnaires should use language that is as plain as possible (Kozobolis & Pasch, ibid). Complex vocabulary and syntax should be avoided, as they can cause a lot of problems and misinterpretations, and, even worse, compromise the quality of the data.

In the case of the *Activities Arising from the Partnership Agreement with the Department of Foreign Languages, Translation and Interpreting of Ionian University, Greece*, the specialized monolingual questionnaire was drafted solely in Greek. This approach involves fewer difficulties, as the target group consisted only of Greek-speaking respondents. Nevertheless, even in monolingual surveys, the use of clear and simple vocabulary and syntax is recommended as a good practice.

Another crucial factor that is linked to the success of a specialized questionnaire is its length, namely the number of questions it contains. In both cases, the questionnaires contained approximately 30 questions, most of which were closed-ended in order to help specialists answer more quickly. In highly specialized and time-constrained environments, such as asylum services, respondents have barely any time to complete questionnaires. Therefore, shorter questionnaires containing primarily closed-ended questions are more likely to get more responses.

- Pre-testing

Although pre-testing is widely documented as an important phase of a survey (see Mathiyazhagan & Nandan, 2010:41; Draugalis, Coons, & Plaza, 2008:3), it is often skipped in order to save time. However, pre-testing is a critical part of a survey, as it can reveal issues related to its validity, such as poor wording or potential misunderstandings, before data collection (Draugalis, Coons, & Plaza, ibid.). Thus, it should not be neglected.

In the projects examined in this article, only the first project (ReTrans) incorporated three rounds of pre-testing to receive valuable feedback on the quality of the questionnaire. In contrast, the second project did not use pre-testing at all due to the fact that the questionnaire was drafted in only one language.

Pre-testing proved very helpful in *ReTrans*, as it allowed the research team to detect mistakes and inconsistencies in the questionnaires (see Kozobolis & Pasch, 2023). Therefore, it is highly recommended as a good practice for the collection of reliable and high-quality data.

- Qualitative data collection

Qualitative data are also very critical for a better understanding of a phenomenon. The main methods for collecting such data include face-to-face, telephone, or digital interviews (e.g., Zoom meetings). When structured carefully, interviews are a highly reliable source of information.

As mentioned above, in the case of the second project, interviews were conducted in order to collect additional qualitative data. More specifically, the research team conducted five semi-structured interviews with employees involved in asylum-related services. The interviews revealed several significant findings (see 2.2.3), which demonstrate that qualitative data can provide insights that may be overlooked by quantitative data. Moreover, when combined with quantitative data analysis, qualitative data can offer a deeper understanding of a phenomenon. Thus, it is highly recommended that both data types be used together.

- Dissemination and sampling

Dissemination is also a very critical part of any study, as it is directly linked to data collection. Choosing the appropriate dissemination methods significantly affects the quality and quantity of survey responses.

In the cases examined in this article, both research teams conducted two rounds of dissemination by sending emails to stakeholders who were suitable for the purposes of each study. The key difference was that, in the case of *ReTrans Project*, the snowball sampling technique was used, as the team hoped to reach as many stakeholders as possible (Kozobolis & Pasch, 2023:94). The 64 complete answers verified the assumptions that stakeholders in such fields can be viewed as a hidden population, which is hard to reach (Mellinger & Hanson, 2016:13).

By contrast, the second project targeted specific Greek public services related to asylum. As a result, the sampling was more controlled, allowing the research team to quantify both the sample and the response rate (see 2.2.1). Indeed, after two rounds of dissemination, the team received 16 out of 25 responses, an acceptable response rate.

- Analysis methods

As mentioned above, any study in a specialized field such as intercultural communication in PSI requires a well-structured analysis methodology. In the case of *ReTrans*, the methodology focused primarily on quantitative data collection and analysis, while the only qualitative source was an open-ended question. By contrast, the second project examined in this article adopted a more balanced methodology approach, combining quantitative data (collected from MOMA reports and the questionnaire) with qualitative data from the interviews. The use of multiple data sources and analysis methods is crucial and deemed necessary to reach more reliable conclusions when examining a phenomenon (see Hasko, 2012:4761). Therefore, a mixed-methods analysis is highly recommended for such studies.

4. Conclusions

The purpose of this article was to propose some good practices for assessing intercultural communication needs, focusing mainly on public service interpreting in asylum contexts. It compared two projects that were carried out between 2022 and 2024, both involving the Department of Foreign Languages, Translation and Interpreting of Ionian University, Greece. These projects, namely, the *ReTrans Project* and *Activities Arising from the Partnership Agreement with the DFLTI*, centered on the provision of interpreting services in the context of asylum procedures. By examining their methodologies and outcomes, we identified both challenges and effective strategies in researching intercultural communication needs related to interpreting services.

In terms of methodology, the comparison of the two projects highlights the importance of adopting a mixed-methods approach. The *ReTrans Project* relied more on quantitative data collection through a multilingual questionnaire, which included an open-ended question for qualitative insights. In contrast, the second project combined both quantitative and qualitative methods, using questionnaires, ministerial reports, and semi-structured interviews. This combination enabled the research team to gain a more comprehensible understanding of the PSI landscape. Therefore, it was concluded that mixed-methods approaches are particularly valuable when dealing with complex services such as PSI.

In conclusion, the study assessed two relevant projects and offered some practical recommendations for future studies. These include employing a mixed-methods analysis, ensuring careful monolingual or multilingual drafting according to the scope of a research, and conducting pre-testing to identify potential problems and misunderstandings before dissemination. Such measures can significantly enhance the evaluation of intercultural communication needs and contribute to more effective public service interpreting frameworks.

References

Draugalis, J., Coons, S., & Plaza, C. (2008). Best practices for survey research reports: a synopsis for authors and reviewers. *American journal of pharmaceutical education* 72(1).

Hasko, V. (2012). Qualitative corpus analysis. *The encyclopedia of applied linguistics*, 4758-4764.

Hellenic Republic Ministry of Migration & Asylum. (n.d.). Retrieved 27/4/2024 from https://migration.gov.gr/statistika/

Ioannidis, A. (2025). Quality assurance in public service interpreting: An overview of the Greek Registry of Public Service Interpreters. *International Journal of Language, Translation and Intercultural Communication*.

Kozobolis, S., & Pasch, H. (2023). Challenges in designing a multilingual questionnaire: The case of ReTrans Project. *Traducción e interpretación en los servicios públicos (TISP) en transición/Public Service Interpreting and Translation (PSIT) in Transition*, 89-98.

Kozobolis, S., Ioannidis, A., Pasch, H., Heinisch, B., Nuč-Blažič, A., Orthaber, S., Zwischenberger, M.B., Simoska, S., Panova-Ignjatovik, T., Aleksoska-Ckatroska, M., Pappa, M., Iacono, K., Vlachopoulos, S.,Pöllabauer, S. (2022). *Working with Interpreters in Refugee Transit Zones: Capacity building and awareness-raising for higher education contexts (Survey Report).* Retrieved 26/4/2025 from https://www.retrans-interpreting.com/research/

Mathiyazhagan, T., & Nandan, D. (2010). Survey research method. *Media Mimansa,* 4(1), 34-45.

Mellinger, C., & Hanson, T. (2016). *Quantitative research methods in translation and interpreting studies.* Routledge.

Robinson, W. (2005). How the European Commission Drafts Legislation in 20 Languages. *Clarity*(53), 4-10.

Schäffner, C. (1997). *Strategies of Translating Political Texts. Text Typology and Translation.* John Benjamins.

Sosoni, V. (2012). A hybrid translation theory for EU texts. *Vertimo Studijos* 5(5), 76-89.

Vlachopoulos, S., Livas, S., & Kozobolis, S. (2023). Tearing down the communication barriers: Towards the Greek register for Public Service Interpreters. In M. Drakaki, & D. Vega (eds) *Humanitarian Crisis Management (KRISIS 2023)*, 154-158.

Wadensjo, C. (1998). *Interpreting as interaction.* Longman.