

15 - Supporting refugees with low literacy

Aim: To raise volunteers' awareness of different levels of literacy which are typically found among refugees.

Introduction

Some adults can read and write in several scripts and others may be able to read and write only in the script of their main language. Some may not be able to read or write in any language, although they can use different forms of communication. For example, some adults are unable to write words with a pen or pencil but may be able to compose a text message quite confidently, while others might understand a symbol with a text such as a No smoking sign.

Literacy refers to the ability to use the written language, both in printed and digital texts, to carry out the tasks of everyday life, access resources and services, including formal and non-formal education, and communicate in social activities. It involves a progression of skills, from the ability to read and understand simple words to the ability to use texts for critical reflection and to communicate effectively in writing.

Low literacy means that one or more of these skills is not present, so there are different types of non-literate adults.

Four literacy profiles (A, B, C, D)

The four types of literacy profiles for adults described below can help you to understand what refugees may need and how to approach the issue (see www.coe.int/en/web/lang-migrants/literacy-profiles). The profiles describe typical educational backgrounds, skills and experiences that can affect learning. It is important to be aware that an individual is likely to be slightly different to any of the profiles and may present characteristics from across the four profiles.

Refugees from groups A and B, and group C to some extent, are learning to read and write for the first time while learning a new language at the same time. This is a big challenge and requires a lot of effort.

Refugees who can read and write in a script different from that used in the target language are not illiterate. They have to learn a new writing system (see also Tool 17 [Challenges in learning to read and write in a new language](#)), but they can use their existing literacy skills in other script(s) to help them in this process.

Portrait	Description
Abdi is a 45 year-old Bantu man from Somalia. His mother tongue, a Cushitic language, is a spoken language only. His level of oral ability in the target language is beginner; he has no contact with the host community, except through mediators.	Group A: Adults like Abdi did not have access to formal education in their country of origin, and their mother tongue is not written down or is not the medium of instruction. Sometimes they have difficulties in understanding how a written text, or a written word, conveys meaning. You can guide these adults in discovering written language: begin by pointing out the meanings and functions of the words in their everyday environment, such as in shops and on street signs, notices etc.
Natalie is a 37 year-old woman from the Ivory Coast. She speaks Bété and French. She never attended school and cannot read and write; despite this she used to be a community leader in her country and an activist for women's rights. She rapidly learned spoken Italian thanks to her good oral skills both in the mother tongue and in French.	Group B: Adults like Natalie have never learned to read or write in their mother tongue, mostly due to lack of formal schooling. They need to learn basic skills such as how to match sounds and letters, combine letters to form words, decode a written word as a spoken word and recognise its meaning. You can guide them to understand how to use written language in their everyday life, for example, to copy their personal information onto a simple form and to recognise the name of a product in a shop.
Abbas is 17 years old with a low level of education (3 years) in his homeland (Pakistan). The writing system of his mother tongue (Urdu) is alphabetical. He has been living in the host country for 5 months as an unaccompanied foreign minor. He is currently attending a vocational training course, but he has great trouble in understanding classes. He manages a simple conversation on familiar topics, and he can recognise high-frequency words used in everyday life and in the educational context. He has regular contact with the host country environment.	Group C: In this group, adults are not able to read or write in most everyday situations, although they may be able to read or write certain things. Most of them received only limited schooling in their mother tongue (in general, less than 5 years), or they may have partially lost their literacy skills through lack of use or further training. You can help refugees in this group to strengthen their existing reading and writing skills and to learn to read and write a variety of texts. This will help them to deal with more of the everyday situations in which the host community uses the written language, such as in public services, work, travel, entertainment and so on.
Beauty is 27 years old and attended high school in Ghana where she used to work as accountant. She speaks Ewe and English. She took a course in Italian (the target language), run by volunteers, with her seven-month old daughter. At the beginning, she had difficulties in reading, writing and learning as a result of trauma. After she had received therapy with a specialist, she was able to use all her personal resources to learn the target language.	Group D: Adults like Beauty are already literate in their mother tongue. Although they may differ in their levels of education, mother tongues and ages, literate refugees can focus on learning the target language and can use written texts to support their learning.

Note: This Toolkit includes tools to help you to support the refugees you are working with as effectively as possible, including activities which are particularly suitable for use with non-literate adults or adults who are beginner readers and writers which can found especially within the various 'scenarios'.