



## Language Support for Migrants *A Council of Europe Toolkit*

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### Tool 10 - Supporting migrants with low literacy

**Aim: To raise awareness of the different literacy profiles which are typically found among migrants.**

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, Others are unable to write words with a pen or pencil but may be able to compose a text message quite confidently or might understand a symbol with a short text, such as a 'no smoking' sign.

It is important to highlight that migrants who can read and write in a script different from that used in the target language are not illiterate. When they have to learn a new writing system (see also Tool 8 *Challenges when learning to read and write in a new language*) they can use their existing literacy skills in one or more other scripts to help them in this process.

Literacy is the capacity to deal with the written code of a language. In other words, it is the ability of a person to identify, understand, interpret and produce written texts (which may be handwritten, printed, digital or multimodal) in order to carry out the tasks of everyday life, access resources and services, including informal and non-formal education, and communicate in social, professional and administrative activities.

Literacy involves a progression of competences, from the ability to read and understand simple words to the ability to use texts for critical reflection and to communicate effectively in writing. For guidance about this progression, you can refer to the Council of Europe's LASLLIAM Reference guide (Literacy and Second Language learning for the Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants)<sup>1</sup>.

This guide defines the four levels of literacy described below.

#### *Level 1: Discovering literacy.*

Reading at this level means, for example, recognising 'sight' words that have been learned by heart as whole units. Writing means drawing or copying from an example. Towards the end of this level, the learner can recognise relevant words they have practised (such as their own name and address, days of the week and months of the year) and can recognise most of the letters of the alphabet and personally relevant symbols or signs like the logo of the metro or tram system.

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<sup>1</sup> Reference guide on Literacy and Second Language Learning for the Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants (LASLLIAM) - <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/-/new-isbn-publication-6-reference-guide-literacy-and-second-language-for-the-linguistic-integration-of-adult-migrants-laslliam->

### *Level 2: Basic decoding and encoding*

This level is about learning the alphabetical principle. At the end of this level, the learner can, for example, read short simple words independently. The learner can also write short words they have practised where there is a close correspondence between sounds and letters.

### *Level 3: Extended decoding and encoding*

At this level decoding and encoding are extended to words where there is a more complex relationship between alphabetical letters (graphemes) and sounds (phonemes). At the end of this stage, the learner can, for example, read and write known words which have more complex phonological structures.

### *Level 4: Towards consolidation and fluency*

At this level the ability to read words, phrases, and sentences about familiar and relevant topics is consolidated. At the end of level 4 the learner can, for example, write the same words as in level 3, but at a faster speed and more fluently.

The four stages of literacy for adults described above can help you to understand what support migrants may need and how to approach the issue. However, it is important to consider that there are likely to be differences between the literacy of an individual and any of the levels described as he or she may present characteristics from across the four levels. In other words, they may have an uneven literacy profile (see also Tool 6 *Being aware and taking account of the uneven linguistic profiles of migrant learners*).

Consider as examples these four different portraits and think about how the background of a person can affect learning.

Abdi is a 45-year-old Bantu man from Somalia. He did not have access to formal education in his country of origin. His mother tongue, a Cushitic language, is a spoken language only; it is not written down. He is arrived 1 year ago in the host country and his level of oral competence in the target language is beginner; he is unemployed and he has no contact with the host community, except through mediators. Abdi is now engaged in a LASLLIAM Level 1 course.
Natalie is a classmate of Abdi's. She is a 37-year-old woman from the Ivory Coast who arrived in the host country 3 years ago under a family reunion scheme. Natalie speaks Bété and French. She never attended school and cannot read or write. She learned a little of the spoken language of the host country thanks to her good oral skills both in her mother tongue and in French.
Abbas is 17 years old with a low level of education (4 years) in his homeland (Pakistan). He received only limited schooling in his mother tongue. He has been living in the host country for 5 months as an unaccompanied minor. He is currently attending a vocational training course and has regular contact with the host country environment.
Fatima is 58 years old and from Afghanistan, where she attended school for 8 years. Like Abbas, she is not able to read or write in most everyday situations, although she may be able to read or write certain things. In her case, this is due to doing little reading or writing over the last 30 years. She arrived in the host country 9 years ago and she has a good competence in the oral language, thanks to a close network of friends and daily interaction in her working environment.

Consider in particular the cases of Abdi and Natalie: they are learning to read and write for the first time while simultaneously learning a new language. This is a big challenge and requires a lot of effort, particularly for Abdi because he is also a beginner in the spoken language.