6 Signs that your client can't read or write well

(even in their own language)

English Unlocked

© 2026 by
Shelley Purchon

Do you work with refugees?

Are you alert to indicators that your client has below functional literacy?

Shame can lead people to hide low literacy even from their own community.

Instead of assuming your client will tell you if they can't read your translation, look for these signs.

© 2026 by
Shelley Purchon

1: Their papers are a mess

Someone who can’t read can’t tell which things are important. Their file or bag might contain everything they ever received, in no particular order.

Not just refugees-

16.6% of working age adults in the UK have "very poor" literacy skills

© 2026 by
Shelley Purchon

2: Reliance on a friend

Refugees who can’t read in any language tend to rely on others to understand how things work and access UK systems. This can make them vulnerable to ‘Mate Crime’.

Keep safeguarding in mind

Watch out for community members who charge “fees” or ask for favors in return.

© 2026 by
Shelley Purchon

3: Slow progress in English class

ESOL provision often assumes that everyone has classroom skills already. ‘Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education’ (SLIFE) tend to repeat levels or drop out

Even teachers can miss the signs

Just because a student can copy from the board doesn’t mean they understand.

© 2026 by
Shelley Purchon

4: Unactioned tasks

If your client keeps failing to do the thing they intend to do, perhaps they cannot read in any language and find UK systems confusing?
This can be mistaken for a reluctance to engage with services.

A client who you see repeatedly about the same thing may be masking low literacy

© 2026 by
Shelley Purchon

5: Creative excuses

For example-
"I've left my glasses at home, can you read it to me?" or *"It's the wrong dialect, I can't understand it."*

Enquire sensitively-

Avoid asking a client about their literacy or education in front of others.

© 2026 by
Shelley Purchon

6: Not taking notes

Ask yourself:

Have I ever seen this person write something down?

A non-literate client might smile and nod but never write down what you say, no matter how important or complex it is.

Those with low literacy tend to have low digital and numeracy skills too.

© 2026 by
Shelley Purchon

We can help you to help them

3 workshops to choose from:

- How to Help Non-literate Refugees to Navigate Life
- How to Help Non-literate Refugees in an ESOL setting
- How to Adapt your Services for Clients with Low Literacy

Find out more at englishunlocked.co.uk

© 2026 by
Shelley Purchon

Discover how to

- Adapt your communication for greater impact
- Spot difficulties early and reduce safeguarding risks
- Create systems that work better for non-literate clients
- Help your client become more self sufficient

Contact
info@englishunlocked.co.uk

© 2026 by
Shelley Purchon

Brought to you by:

Shelley Purchon

Shelley taught English to people from around the world for 25 years. She's the founding director of English Unlocked.

Joshua Aspden

A former Resettlement Lead, Joshua is the founding director of Diasporanomics and the UK's leading expert on migrant finance.

Contact
info@englishunlocked.co.uk

© 2026 by
Shelley Purchon