

Notes on using captions when teaching on Zoom

Before you start teaching

If you have learners who are using captions, make sure you keep an eye on the captions, even if you don't need to use them. You will be able to judge the right speed to speak at, know when to stop and repeat or rephrase and know why your learner is laughing when the captions make a silly mistake.

Make sure learners understand the captions are automatic and they will never be 100% accurate.

If you turn on the auto captions before the lesson, the learners will have them on their screen when they join the Zoom call if they are using Windows and iPads, but Mac users may need to turn on the captions manually.

Make sure learners know how to turn the captions on (if they don't come on automatically) and that they can make the font bigger, click and drag the captions round the screen or turn them off.

It is worth practicing before you use captions for the first time to get used to speaking very slightly slower than usual.

During the lesson

The captions are most accurate when one person speaks slowly, clearly and in complete sentences. They are less accurate when you speak quickly or when several people are having a conversation and the speaker keeps changing.

You can't use the automatic captions in a breakout room. If you have a learner who relies on captions, they will need to stay in the main Zoom room with a partner for any pair work. The alternative is to assign someone to do manual captions or use chat as these functions both still work in a breakout room.

If the captions go wrong you may need to re-phrase or repeat a word or sentence. Before you rush to do this, be aware that if you pause slightly at the end of a sentence the captions will often go back and correct a word based on context and grammar once it has the whole sentence (just like lipreaders when they 'move sideways' to fill in a missing word).

Problem words

Deaf or death - Like all speech to text systems Zoom captions struggles to tell the difference between death and deaf, even in context. It tends to favour 'death'. This is unfortunate if you work in the Deaf Education Department. I have found you can force it to caption the word 'deaf' if you over-emphasise the letter F almost as if it were a separate syllable.

Names - Zoom will recognise common names, especially in the context of a sentence. It may recognise a name if you repeat it slowly. If you say each letter slowly and clearly it will spell it out in capitals. You may need to use the Chat, whiteboard or finger spelling to clarify proper nouns.

Swear words - be aware that Zoom will caption swear words in full. Google Meet is more modest and will caption the initial letter only, followed by the appropriate number of asterisks.