

Dragon makes live events more accessible and opens up new career opportunities



When you switch on the evening news and turn on the subtitles so you can follow the headlines while cooking your tea, you are most likely seeing Dragon software in action.

“I used Dragon 12 when I was training at Roehampton University. It was stunningly accurate for straight dictation and good for respeaking too. Now I have Dragon Professional Individual which is a definite step up in terms of accuracy and is even more impressive.”

— Zoe Moores, respeaker, research student and visiting lecturer

Dragon behind the scenes

At conferences in the past - and even quite recently - there would be a stenographer typing away but now the technology is becoming so sophisticated that it can be used for live transcription. These days most of the subtitles used in live broadcasts such as the news, politics, sports and chat shows are created by respeaking, a process which relies on the use of speech recognition software, usually Dragon.

Subtitling is essential for deaf and hard of hearing audience members and a helpful cue for non-native speakers too. But up until now it's been hard to get enough simultaneous subtitling or captioning in public places. All that is about to change. A new specialism is respeaking for events, for example walking tours, public lectures, museum visits, opening ceremonies, literary festivals, discussions and Q&A events.

Making live events accessible

After a degree in Classics and Modern Foreign Languages from Somerville, Oxford Zoe Moores did an MA in Linguistics at Manchester and worked as an EFL teacher in Japan for three years before becoming a primary teacher. In 2013 she decided to move away from teaching and joined a Masters course in Audiovisual Translation at the University of Roehampton.

After qualifying, she worked on local news and documentaries. She works as a professional respeaker and lecturer and is currently a research student working on projects around accessibility.

Recently Zoe has trialled respeaking at eight different events around the UK. These included tours of the Wellcome Collection in London and Manchester Art Gallery. Captioning charity StageTEXT acted as advisors and around 20 people attended each event. It provided an opportunity to get first-hand feedback on how best to use respeaking in these settings.

“When the unexpected happens - and you cope - you get a real adrenaline rush.”

— Zoe Moores

Part of Zoe’s role was to check internet connectivity before the event and identify the best wifi areas because many buildings have ‘dead spots’. The organisers have been experimenting with having the respeaker as part of the group or in a separate room to see what offers the best sound quality.

The skill of respeaking

This is a good time for those thinking of taking up respeaking as a career. In lockdown, there have been many online meetings, webinars, conferences which have needed live captioning.

Respeaking is not just about sitting in a room and repeating what somebody else has said. It is a skilled job. Prospective respeakers will need to be quick thinking, decisive and able to multitask. Obviously if they are working on current affairs programmes they will need to be up to date with the news. There is a considerable amount of preparation and editing involved and they will need to be familiar with specialist terminology, enter unusual words and phrases into Dragon. They also need to check for homophones – words that sound the same - that may cause confusion or unintentional comedy such as, “He was driving in an erratic manor.”

“Training to be a respeaker is a good choice if you are a natural problem solver,” said Zoe Moores. “But it’s no job for someone who is afraid of making mistakes or being challenged, because when you are respeaking at a live event, anything can happen!”

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