

Maddie Long: 3 Minute Thesis competition

Hello, and welcome to Forward Thinking, a monthly podcast from the School of Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences, where we talk to our researchers about their brilliant ideas and projects.

My name is Claire Francis and today I'm talking to Maddie Long. Maddie is a PhD student in Linguistics and English Language at the University of Edinburgh. Maddie works with linguists and psychologists to explore questions at the intersection of cognitive ageing, second language acquisition and the pragmatics of human communication.

Maddie recently won the University of Edinburgh final of the 3 Minute Thesis competition. She then went on to win the semi-finals and is now one of six finalists who will compete in the UK final on the 12th of September.

Claire: Welcome Maddie, thanks so much for talking to us.

Maddie: Thank you for having me.

Claire: So firstly can you tell us, what is the 3 Minute Thesis Competition?

Maddie: So the 3 Minute Thesis competition is a competition for PhD students, in which we have to condense years of research for our PhD into a nice three-minute segment, and we're only given one slide and we have to present it to a broad audience.

Claire: Could you explain what your particular research is about and what you spoke about in the competition?

Maddie: Absolutely. So I'll start off by saying that some research has shown a positive effect of bilingualism on cognitive functions, and this effect has actually been found across the lifespan for bilinguals. But I'm interested in people who learn a language later in life, so I want to see if the same benefits emerge if you learn a language as an adult, and just how long it might take to see some of these cognitive changes. So as part of my PhD, I've been testing older adult language learners, both here in Edinburgh and on the beautiful Isle of Skye at a Gaelic college called Sabhal Mòr Ostaig and the results so far have been really, really impressive. Overall, learners experienced significant attentional improvement after just one week of an intensive language course, regardless of the language, whether it be Gaelic, Norwegian, or Turkish.

Claire: What kind of results did you expect to find when you began your research, and have these expectations differed at all?

Maddie: Well to start off, the idea of potentially finding any sort of cognitive change within one week of a language course *seemed* a bit risky, but thankfully I have adventurous supervisors who encouraged me to go for it. So, we thought that potentially we might see a result, because it's an intensive language course and we have seen these results in bilinguals, so we thought we might expand it and try it and just see what happens. And so we were very pleasantly surprised when we found this overwhelming significant improvement in attention in people mainly over the age of 50, and it really shows that, regardless of the language, this is really good for older adults, health wise.

Claire: And what made you decide to compete in the 3 Minute Thesis competition?

Maddie: I have to give all the credit to my supervisor, Dr Thomas Bak. He had recommended it to me and very much encouraged me to just go for it, and I'm so happy he did. The competition has been really an amazing opportunity for me to improve my public speaking skills and it's given me an appreciation for science communication.

Claire: How did you prepare for the competition?

Maddie: It's all about practice. That's what they tell you, which is absolutely true! But I think it's really important not to practice just in the same place or with the same people over and over again. It's very valuable to mix it up, so I practiced in my room, every room of my flat, at random moments during the day, when I was having a coffee, I Skyped with my friends and my family, I showed my supervisors... I really wanted to ensure the talk was relevant to a broad audience and that I would be comfortable delivering it in any type of environment.

Claire: What do you think is key to delivering an engaging presentation?

Maddie: I think it's not about following some sort of specific guidelines or formula – I know when I first decided to enter the competition, the first thing I did was Google 'how to give an effective presentation' and watch all the other 3 Minute Thesis presentations! But as I started to write the talk, I realised that it's really important to be personal and organic. You want to feel like you're telling a story, and that the story is interesting to pretty much anyone you encounter. You really want your personality and enthusiasm to guide the way you present your talk, because in the end there's no right way of giving a talk, and being authentic helps you and also helps engage the audience.

Claire: Just how difficult was it to condense your research down?

Maddie: It was very difficult. The entire time you're doing a PhD, you're trying to absorb every little detail about your area of research, and so when it comes to giving something short and snappy, and explaining what you're really doing, it can be quite tricky. I started off with a lot of notes, and then started honing in on what theories and ideas to present, to the point where I finally got down to 'Do I need this one specific word, is it relevant?!'

Claire: Do you think that there's perhaps a danger of oversimplifying a research subject when you're condensing it down into something as small as three minutes and one slide?

Maddie: Of course. As much as I'd love to go into all of the details of my PhD, there's just no way you can fit it into a three minute talk. So I think the idea is just to give a bigger picture of what you're doing, and hope that it serves as a gateway for people to ask further questions and get more details and sort of establish this engagement with the public.

Claire: Why do you think competitions like this are valuable for universities and for researchers?

Maddie: Well, for universities it's a great way of showcasing the research being carried out. For academics and researchers like myself, it's an excellent opportunity to practice having to sum up your research in a comprehensible little pitch that you can really bring with you anywhere and tell anyone when they ask the inevitable question, 'So, what's your PhD about?'

Claire: Have you ever competed in any events like this before?

Maddie: I haven't! This is actually my first one, and I was so nervous to begin with. I was shaking when I was up there! But again, I can't thank my supervisors enough for encouraging me to do this, and I would highly recommend this to any PhD student. It's so incredibly helpful in building your

confidence, in being able to discuss your research which is so important; you don't want to just keep it to yourself on a laptop.

Claire: What would your top three tips be, for anyone thinking about competing in a 3 Minute Thesis competition?

Maddie: I say my first tip is just really be authentic, let your personality shine through when you're giving your talk. I think when you get up on the stage, and you look in front of everyone and you realise you only have three minutes and you have to hit that mark, I wouldn't worry too much about missing a word or missing a line, because in the end, the audience doesn't know what your talk is about! So if you mess up a line or a word just keep going, get through it and be confident and be happy and enjoy what you're doing. And my third tip would be, I think it's really important when it comes to practicing, different environments, different people, and really make sure everyone you talk to is in some way engaged in what you're saying, because it's really important to make it relevant to everyone and interesting to everyone.

Claire: And finally, how are you preparing for your upcoming final?

Maddie: I'm preparing in much the same way that I have been for the previous rounds. It's very exciting to have made it this far but I'm trying not to let the stage I'm at affect my nerves and overthink things. So I practise a little bit every day in different environments and try to focus on the delivery and making sure that it's a talk that I would want to listen to.

Claire: Thanks so much Maddie for talking to us today, and good luck in the final.

If you want to find out more about Maddie's research, follow the links at the Forward Thinking blog, and if you want to hear more podcasts like this one, subscribe to Forward Thinking.

Maddie: Thanks so much!