

## Silent Period vs. Selective Mutism in Second Language Learners: A Critical Exploration of Processes and Misdiagnosis

Luigi Iannacci, Ph.D.,

Professor in the School of Education and Professional Learning at Trent University, Canada

### Abstract:

This presentation clarifies what the silent period is during second language learning and acquisition processes and how it differs greatly from selective mutism. This critical distinction is necessary as the research this presentation draws on demonstrates that the two very distinct phenomena are confused and conflated, thus leading to the problematic misdiagnosis of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students within school systems as selective mutes. Further, this form of pathologization leads to practices, pedagogies and interactions between teachers and students indicative of coercive relations of power. Examples of these interactions are provided. The presentation critically explores the ways in which silence is generally misunderstood and pathologized within society to contextualize how misinformation about CLD learners and their misdiagnosis as selective mutes is located within dominant discourses that impact the micro context of the classroom. Importantly, professional development that focusses on culturally relevant pedagogy and an understanding of second language acquisition processes is also explored to address the prevention of misdiagnosis and conversely, the furthering of pedagogies, practices and interactions between educators and CLD students that are respectful and responsive to their language and literacy development and cultural and linguistic assets.

### Keywords:

Silent period; selective mutism; language acquisition, teaching, culturally and linguistically diverse learners, professional development.