

**CRITICISM AND BIBLIOGRAPHY**  
**КРИТИКА И БИБЛИОГРАФИЯ**

Рецензия | Review

## Review on the book “Dialogs on L.S. Vygotsky”<sup>1</sup>

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## Рецензия на книгу «Диалоги о Л.С. Выготском»<sup>2</sup>

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The book is based on a series of discussions between Professors N.E. Veraksa (M.V. Lomonosov Moscow State University) and N.N. Veresov (Monash University, Australia) on the key concepts of Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory and the possibilities for its application in educational practice. The two scholars have a long-standing collaborative relationship and they are coauthors of a number of academic papers. The book is aimed at early years educators, psychologists, students specialising in developmental psychology, and anyone interested in issues relating to child development.

In 2022, the UNESCO Department of Early Childhood Education and Upbringing at the International Pedagogical Academy of Pre-school Education organised an educational project – a series of seminars entitled “L.S. Vygotsky's Cultural-Historical Concept and Contemporary Preschool Education”. The full versions of these talks are available on the IPAE website and on YouTube.

N.E. Veraksa and N.N. Veresov emphasise that the aim was “...not so much to “educate” as to spark the audience's interest in L.S. Vygotsky's theory. We wanted to motivate our listeners to read his works and those of other representatives of this academic school for themselves and, most importantly, to help the participants in our discussions to independently reflect on how these ideas might be applied in their own teaching practice” (Pp. 7–8).

The authors chose the topics of the conversations themselves, but did not discuss the content in advance; consequently, the reader is presented with lively, and in many respects even spontaneous dialogues. At the end of each discussion, time was set aside to answer questions from the audience. Some of these answers are also included in the book.

This rare genre might be termed “literary peripateticism”. Its main merit lies in the fact that the reader does not merely receive academic information, but is drawn, in

<sup>1</sup> Veraksa N.E., Veresov N.N. Dialogs on L.S. Vygotsky. Moscow: Moscow University Publ., 2025. 159 p.

<sup>2</sup> Веракса Н.Е., Вересов Н.Н. Диалоги о Л.С. Выготском / Предисл. Ю.П. Зинченко. М.: Изд-во Московского университета, 2025. 159 с.

a natural way, into the authors' train of thought, gaining the opportunity to compare theoretical positions, explore possible developments and seek ways to apply "big" ideas in practice. Thus, the book not only provides a conceptual framework but also vividly demonstrates the cultural and historical mode of thought in psychology and pedagogy.

In academic literature, there are two main types of dialogue: the Socratic, in which there is a joint "search for truth", and the didactic, in which a figure such as Philotes proclaims truths already known to him to the assembled audience. "Dialogues on L.S. Vygotsky" is closer to the second type. The role of Philotes fell to N.N. Veresov, whilst N.E. Veraksa guides the course of the dialogues with questions, occasionally interjecting his own comments and remarks.

The book comprises a total of eight conversations.

1. Vygotsky's cultural-historical concept and contemporary pre-school education.

2. The concept of "ideal" and "actual" forms, and the process of development.

3. The zone of proximal development.

4. Vygotsky's laws.

5. Vygotsky's dialectic.

6. The psychology of creativity in Vygotsky's works.

7. Dialectics and the study of the process of child development.

8. Consciousness: cultural or natural?

The authors of the book unanimously insist that the central category in Vygotsky's logic is development, understood as a dialectically contradictory process rather than a mere accumulation of changes. In the first conversation, Veresov defines the subject of the cultural-historical theory: it is the process of the development of higher psychological functions. "Development presupposes both preservation and change. These two opposing elements, as it were, determine the vector of development", adds Veraksa (p. 12). Essentially, this refers to Hegel's "Aufhebung" – the negation that preserves what is valuable. Vygotsky constantly employed this category of dialectics and on more than one occasion specifically explained its meaning, in particular when discussing the interconnection between "the lines of the child's organic and cultural development".

There is also no disagreement between the authors regarding their understanding of *experience*. In the mature cultural-historical theory, experience is assigned the role of a "dynamic unit of consciousness" (Vygotsky). The category of experience allows us to understand how a particular life situation is refracted in the child's consciousness.

Veresov deliberately uses the concept of "refraction" in place of "reflection" when discussing higher psychological functions. In his view, "the principle of reflection works very well in physiology and for natural, elementary, simple functions. But the principle of refraction begins where human psychology itself begins" (p. 18).

It is worth noting that Vygotsky himself never, anywhere, contrasted "refraction" with "reflection", let alone as superior and inferior principles of the mind's functioning. In one of his final lectures, he emphasised that our consciousness is always a reflection of reality and that this is the only possible path to a scientific explanation of con-

sciousness. Having rejected the materialist principle of reflection, Veresov logically concludes that "...consciousness can arise only from another consciousness" (p. 35).

Among the most valuable sections of the book is the conversation on "ideal" and "actual" forms in the process of development. This is one of the least explored problem areas of cultural-historical theory. For development, the "environment" as a set of external influences and factors is insufficient. It is necessary that "ideal forms" be present in our lives from early childhood, entering into interaction with actual forms and setting the vector for the development of the personality. "Vygotsky writes quite explicitly: the greatest distinguishing feature of child development is that this development takes place under conditions of interaction with the environment in which the ideal form, the final form, the one that should appear at the end of development, not only exists in the environment and comes into contact with the child from the very beginning, but it actually interacts, actually exerts an influence on the primary form, on the child's first steps in development; that is to say, something that is to take shape at the very end of development is, in some way, already present now and influences the very first steps of that development" (Veresov, p. 33).

The conversation on the zone of proximal development (ZPD) aims to liberate this concept from the "formalism" that has become entrenched in its interpretations over many years both in our country and abroad. Veraksa sees the reason for this state of affairs in the fact that the problem of the ZPD is discussed without due connection to the problem of experience (*perezhivanie*) and, moreover, in the harmful influence of the Piagetian paradigm. Agreeing with this, Veresov examines an example of a "primitive and superficial interpretation" of the ZPD from an English-language handbook on pedagogy.

Phenomena of the external environment are not reflected in experiences as in mirrors, but are refracted in one way or another, always in a unique manner, – Veresov emphasises (p. 48), apparently assuming that in an ordinary mirror light is reflected without refraction. Veresov sees in the principle of refraction the key to every child's unique individuality: each child experiences the events happening to them in their own way each time. This is what Vygotsky teaches us – whereas the principle of reflection, "dating back to Descartes", levelled out children's uniqueness. (In this connection, it is worth recalling that it was none other than Descartes who discovered the law of the refraction of light).

The differences between Veraksa's and Veresov's positions lie, chiefly, in their methodological emphases and the degree of categorical certainty in their judgements.

Veresov tends to argue polemically, distinguishing the "classical" reading of Vygotsky from "new, contemporary interpretations", for which many interpreters take offence (p. 13). Below, Veresov draws a clear distinction between the approaches of L.S. Vygotsky and A.N. Leontiev, whilst not denying the kinship of their theoretical views and approaches. Both regard the social environment as the *source* of development, rather than an external factor or "setting" in which personality de-

velopment takes place. However, Leontiev did not accept the proposition that experiences occupy a central place in the system of consciousness. "He did not agree with this; he criticised Vygotsky for reducing everything to the idea of experience. According to Leontiev, it is activity itself that is the source of development" (p. 34). This fundamental disagreement gave rise to many others in the subsequent debate — for example, "completely opposing views" on the nature of children's play (p. 61), as well as Leontiev's accusations of idealism" levelled at Vygotsky (p. 35).

Veraksa is not quite so categorical in his assessments, although he generally does not dispute his interlocutor's assertions. Refraining from direct debate on theoretical issues, he repeatedly steers the conversation towards the realm of practical pedagogy (a field more familiar to the majority of the audience). "How can we recognise developmentor the lack thereof—in the pedagogical process? What are the indicators of development? What does the zone of proximal development mean in practice?" asks Veraksa. Veresov, too, readily takes up pedagogical topics.

The discussion on the zone of proximal development (ZPD) aims to free this concept from the "formalism" that has become entrenched in its interpretations over many years, both here and abroad. Veresov attributes this state of affairs to the fact that the issue of the ZPD is discussed without due regard for the problem of experience and, moreover, under the detrimental influence of Piaget's paradigm. Agreeing with this, Veresov analyses an example of a "primitive and superficial interpretation" of the ZPD from English-language pedagogy textbook.

Summarising his twenty years of research experience, Veresov demonstrates that Vygotsky's ZPD can be regarded as a psychological reality, a diagnostic method,

and a theoretical concept. "We must therefore, every time we speak of the zone of proximal development, clarify: what exactly are we referring to when we speak of the zone of development?" (p. 53). The ZPD constitutes a methodologically complex, multi-layered conceptual construct. It is a "meeting place for the child and the adult", a space for their cultural interaction

The fourth discussion focuses on the psychological laws discovered by Vygotsky. According to Veresov, these are divided into two groups: the laws governing the genesis of higher psychological functions and the laws governing the interaction of psychological functions within the system of consciousness. Towards the end of the conversation, the issue of cultural age is raised, which "Vygotsky merely mentions but does not elaborate on" (p. 87). No specific criteria for determining cultural age are established in his works, and his students have overlooked this important issue.

We shall conclude our analysis here and keep the reader in suspense — we shall not reveal the content of the remaining four conversations. Please take our word for it that they provide no less rich and wholesome food for thought, both for specialists in the fields of psychology and pedagogy and for the general public who have reached cultural maturity.

On the whole, the book under review makes a strong impression. Its initial focus on practising teachers has not diminished its conceptual rigour or reduced its depth. Together with E. Yu. Zavershneva's recently published monograph "The Vygotsky Case" (Moscow: Kanon+, 2026), "Dialogues" outlines a number of promising avenues for the development of cultural-historical psychology and re-formulates the tasks whose resolution Lev Semenovich Vygotsky bequeathed to us.

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