The Economics of Language Education

GRIN, François


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THE ECONOMICS OF LANGUAGE EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION

Because the economics of language education, as a field of investigation, differs somewhat from most of the scholarly work on language and education presented in this volume, this entry does not offer a descriptive or historical account of research, but instead emphasizes the presentation of analytical concepts along with their meaning, their function and the relationships between them.

The following section “Definitions and Scope” provides a general framework that explains the position of the economics of language education with respect to three closely related areas, namely education economics, language economics and policy evaluation, before introducing key concepts and analytical distinctions. The section on “Major Contributions” presents the application of human capital theory to foreign language (FL) skills, which makes up the bulk of the literature on the economics of language education. The section on “Problems and Difficulties” turns to important issues of resource distribution. The section on “Challenges” addresses a set of unsolved issues in the field. The last section, on “Future Directions” discusses likely developments in the light of policy needs.

We shall not examine the teaching of children’s mother tongue when the latter also is the dominant or official language (e.g. the teaching of French to children of francophone families in France), because the corresponding economic issues are analytically very different from those that arise in the context of foreign language teaching, which is the focus of this entry.

DEFINITIONS AND SCOPE: ALLOCATION AND DISTRIBUTION OF RESOURCES IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

The economics of language education is a specific area of inquiry that may be approached from different disciplinary perspectives. Starting out from mainstream economics, one would generally use the well-established conceptual and methodological apparatus of education economics as a stepping stone (Johnes and Johnes, 2004). This strategy, however, may confine the examination to a relatively narrow range of