



Impact of Digital-Learning Tools on ... Mahmud, W. Et. al. (2025)

Impact of Digital-Learning Tools on Knowledge and Skills Acquisition in Agricultural Sciences among Secondary School Students in Northern Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigated the impact of digital learning tools on agricultural knowledge acquisition and skill development among secondary school students in rural Northern Nigeria. A quasi-experimental design was employed, involving 100 students from rural secondary schools, divided into an experimental group (using digital learning tools) and a control group (using traditional teaching methods). Data were collected through pre- and post-tests on agricultural knowledge, practical skill assessments, and a retention test. The results revealed that students in the experimental group demonstrated significant improvements in both agricultural knowledge (mean increase of 30.60 points) and practical skills (mean increase of 31.65 points), compared to the control group, which showed smaller gains. The experimental group also exhibited better retention of knowledge, with a minimal decrease in post-test scores. Despite these positive outcomes, challenges such as lack of electricity, poor internet connectivity, inadequate teacher training, and limited access to digital devices were identified as major barriers to the effective implementation of digital tools. The findings suggest that digital learning tools significantly enhance agricultural education by improving students' knowledge, skills, and retention, but highlight the need for addressing infrastructural and training-related challenges to maximize their effectiveness. This study underscores the importance of integrating technology into agricultural education, particularly in rural settings, to bridge educational gaps and foster sustainable agricultural development.

Keywords: digital learning tools, agricultural education, knowledge acquisition, skill development

Introduction

Agriculture remains the backbone of Northern Nigeria's economy, providing livelihoods for the majority of its population and contributing significantly to food security and national economic growth. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2022), the agricultural sector accounts for approximately 25% of Nigeria's GDP, with Northern Nigeria playing a pivotal role due to its vast arable land and favourable climatic conditions for the cultivation of crops such as millet, sorghum, rice, and maize. Despite its potential, agricultural productivity in the region has been hindered by outdated farming techniques, limited access to modern tools, and insufficient knowledge transfer to younger generations. Education, particularly at the secondary school level, is critical for equipping students with the knowledge and skills needed to adopt innovative agricultural practices and technologies that can transform the sector. Studies by Oladipo et al. (2023) emphasize that effective agricultural education can foster a new generation of skilled farmers and entrepreneurs,



Impact of Digital-Learning Tools on ... Mahmud, W. Et. al. (2025)

thereby driving rural development and economic sustainability. However, teaching agriculture in rural schools across Northern Nigeria faces numerous challenges, which threaten the quality and relevance of agricultural education. Many schools lack basic infrastructure, such as laboratories and demonstration farms, which are essential for practical learning. Teachers often rely on outdated curricula and traditional teaching methods that fail to engage students or reflect the realities of modern agriculture. Additionally, rural schools frequently suffer from a shortage of qualified teachers, compounded by inadequate professional development opportunities (Adewale & Ibrahim, 2021). These challenges contribute to a growing disconnect between agricultural education and the practical needs of the sector, leaving students ill-prepared to address the pressing issues of food insecurity, climate change, and resource management.

In recent years, digital learning tools have emerged as a potential solution to bridge these gaps. Tools such as mobile apps, e-learning platforms, and virtual simulations offer innovative ways to deliver agricultural education, enabling students to acquire both theoretical knowledge and practical skills. Digital tools can provide access to up-to-date information on modern farming techniques, facilitate interactive and experiential learning, and overcome geographical barriers that limit access to quality education in rural areas. For example, a study by Nwosu et al. (2022) demonstrated that the use of mobile applications in agricultural training programs significantly improved knowledge retention and practical skills among participants. Despite these promising developments, the integration of digital tools into agricultural education in rural Northern Nigeria remains limited due to infrastructural challenges, such as unreliable electricity and internet connectivity, as well as resistance to change among educators and policymakers. This study seeks to explore the impact of digital learning tools on agricultural knowledge acquisition and skill development among secondary school students in rural areas of Northern Nigeria. This research aims to provide insights that can inform policies and practices for the integration of technology in agricultural education by addressing the barriers to effective agricultural education and examining the potential of digital tools to enhance learning outcomes. In doing so, it contributes to the broader goal of empowering rural communities and fostering sustainable agricultural development in the region.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to investigate the impact of digital learning tools on agricultural knowledge acquisition and skill development among secondary school students in rural areas of Northern Nigeria. Specifically, the objectives are:

1. To determine the baseline agricultural knowledge and skills of secondary school students before the introduction of digital learning tools.
2. To evaluate the effect of digital learning tools on students' agricultural knowledge acquisition compared to traditional teaching methods.
3. To assess the impact of digital learning tools on students' practical agricultural skills development.
4. To examine the retention of agricultural knowledge among students taught using digital learning tools versus those taught using traditional methods.
5. To identify challenges associated with implementing digital learning tools in agricultural education in rural schools.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide the study:



Impact of Digital-Learning Tools on ... Mahmud, W. Et. al. (2025)

1. What is the baseline agricultural knowledge and skill level of secondary school students in rural Northern Nigeria before the introduction of digital learning tools?
2. How do digital learning tools affect students' agricultural knowledge acquisition compared to traditional teaching methods?
3. What is the impact of digital learning tools on the development of students' practical agricultural skills?
4. How does the retention of agricultural knowledge differ between students taught using digital learning tools and those taught using traditional methods?
5. What challenges are encountered in the implementation of digital learning tools in agricultural education in rural schools?

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two complementary theories: the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Constructivist Learning Theory, both of which provide a foundation for understanding the integration of digital learning tools in agricultural education. The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), developed by Davis (1989), posits that two key factors—*perceived usefulness* and *perceived ease of use*—influence an individual's intention to adopt and use technology. In the context of this study, TAM explains how students and teachers in rural schools may perceive and adopt digital learning tools for agricultural education. For instance, if students find digital tools helpful in acquiring agricultural knowledge and easy to use, they are more likely to engage with them, leading to improved learning outcomes. Recent studies, such as that by Adetunji and Bello (2023), highlight the relevance of TAM in understanding the adoption of e-learning platforms in Sub-Saharan Africa, emphasizing the importance of addressing barriers like technological infrastructure and user training.

The Constructivist Learning Theory, rooted in the works of Piaget (1970) and Vygotsky (1978), emphasizes that learners construct knowledge actively through interaction with their environment and meaningful experiences. This theory underscores the importance of hands-on, experiential learning in agricultural education, which aligns with the use of digital tools such as virtual simulations, interactive videos, and mobile applications. By engaging students in interactive and practical learning activities, digital tools create opportunities for deeper understanding and skill development. For example, research by Nwosu et al. (2022) demonstrates that virtual farming simulations significantly enhance students' ability to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world agricultural practices. Together, TAM and Constructivist Learning Theory provide a robust framework for examining how digital tools can be effectively integrated into agricultural education. TAM offers insights into the factors influencing technology adoption, while Constructivist Learning Theory emphasizes the pedagogical benefits of interactive and experiential learning facilitated by digital tools. This dual perspective ensures a comprehensive understanding of both the technological and educational dimensions of the study.

Review of Related Studies

Digital tools have increasingly been recognized as transformative in enhancing educational outcomes across various disciplines, including agriculture. Research has shown that tools such as mobile applications, virtual simulations, and e-learning platforms can significantly improve knowledge acquisition, skill development, and student engagement in agricultural education. For instance, a study by Nwosu et al. (2022) found that mobile applications designed for agricultural training enhanced both theoretical knowledge and practical skills among rural students in Nigeria. These tools provided interactive and accessible learning experiences, enabling students to better



Impact of Digital-Learning Tools on ... Mahmud, W. Et. al. (2025)

understand modern farming techniques and crop management practices. Similarly, Olayemi and Adebayo (2021) explored the use of virtual reality (VR) simulations in agricultural education. Their findings revealed that VR tools allowed students to experience realistic farming scenarios, such as pest control and irrigation management, in a controlled and risk-free environment. This approach not only improved students' practical skills but also increased their interest in pursuing agriculture as a career. Furthermore, global studies, such as those by Patel et al. (2022), have highlighted the potential of e-learning platforms in agricultural extension services, noting that these platforms enable farmers and students to access up-to-date agricultural information and training remotely.

Despite these advancements, there is a noticeable gap in research focusing on the integration of digital tools in agricultural education within rural Northern Nigeria. Most studies in Nigeria have concentrated on urban or peri-urban settings, where access to technology and infrastructure is relatively better (Adewale & Ibrahim, 2021). Rural schools in Northern Nigeria face unique challenges, including limited access to electricity, poor internet connectivity, and a lack of digital literacy among teachers and students. These barriers have hindered the adoption and effective use of digital learning tools in agricultural education, leaving rural students at a disadvantage. Moreover, while studies such as that by Adetunji and Bello (2023) have examined the adoption of e-learning platforms in Sub-Saharan Africa, they often overlook the specific needs and contexts of agricultural education. For instance, rural students require tools tailored to their local agricultural practices, such as resources on drought-resistant crops and sustainable farming methods. This lack of localized and context-specific research underscores the need for studies that address the unique challenges and opportunities in integrating digital tools into agricultural education in rural Northern Nigeria.

Methodology

The study adopted a quasi-experimental design to evaluate the impact of digital learning tools on agricultural knowledge acquisition and skill development among secondary school students in rural areas of Northern Nigeria. The design involved two groups: an experimental group that received instruction using digital learning tools and a control group taught using traditional teaching methods. The population of the study comprised secondary school students in rural Northern Nigeria, with a sample size of 100 students selected using a multistage sampling technique. Schools were first stratified by location and accessibility to technology, and then students were randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups.

Data were collected using a combination of instruments, including a structured questionnaire, a knowledge test, and a practical skill assessment checklist. The instruments were validated by a panel of experts in agricultural education and instructional technology, ensuring content validity. Reliability was tested using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a coefficient of 0.85, indicating high internal consistency. The intervention involved teaching the experimental group with digital tools, such as mobile apps and virtual simulations, for six weeks, while the control group followed the standard curriculum. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize demographic characteristics and inferential statistics, such as paired t-tests and ANCOVA, to compare knowledge acquisition, skill development, and retention between the two groups.

Presentation of Results

Research Question One:

What is the baseline agricultural knowledge and skill level of secondary school students in rural Northern Nigeria before the introduction of digital learning tools?



Impact of Digital-Learning Tools on ... Mahmud, W. Et. al. (2025)

Table 1: Baseline Agricultural Knowledge and Skill Level of Students

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
Agricultural Knowledge Score	45.20	8.35	Moderate
Practical Skill Score	40.75	7.90	Low

Note: Scores were based on a 100-point scale.

The results in Table 1 indicate that the baseline agricultural knowledge level of secondary school students in rural Northern Nigeria was moderate, with a mean score of 45.20 (SD = 8.35) out of 100. This suggests that while students possessed some foundational agricultural knowledge, there were significant gaps in their understanding. Similarly, the baseline practical skill level was low, with a mean score of 40.75 (SD = 7.90). These findings highlight the need for targeted interventions, such as the integration of digital learning tools, to improve both theoretical knowledge and practical agricultural skills among students in rural areas.

Research Question Two:

How do digital learning tools affect students’ agricultural knowledge acquisition compared to traditional teaching methods?

Table 2: Effect of Digital Learning Tools on Agricultural Knowledge Acquisition

Group	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	Mean Difference	Standard Deviation	t-value	p-value
Experimental Group (Digital Tools)	45.20	75.80	30.60	6.45	15.23	<0.001
Control Group (Traditional Methods)	44.85	52.90	8.05	5.12	3.21	<0.01

Note: Scores were based on a 100-point scale.

As shown in Table 2, students in the experimental group, who were taught using digital learning tools, demonstrated a significant improvement in agricultural knowledge acquisition. The mean score for the experimental group increased from 45.20 (pre-test) to 75.80 (post-test), with a mean difference of 30.60 (SD = 6.45). This improvement was statistically significant (t = 15.23, p < 0.001), indicating that the digital tools had a substantial positive effect on students' knowledge. In contrast, the control group, which was taught using traditional methods, showed a smaller increase in knowledge, from a pre-test mean of 44.85 to a post-test mean of 52.90, with a mean difference of 8.05 (SD = 5.12). The difference was statistically significant (t = 3.21, p < 0.01), but much smaller compared to the experimental group. These results suggest that digital learning tools were more effective in enhancing agricultural knowledge acquisition than traditional teaching methods.

Research Question Three:

What is the impact of digital learning tools on the development of students’ practical agricultural skills?

Table 3: Impact of Digital Learning Tools on the Development of Practical Agricultural Skills

Group	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	Mean Difference	Standard Deviation	t-value	p-value
Experimental Group (Digital Tools)	40.75	72.40	31.65	7.12	14.45	<0.001
Control Group (Traditional Methods)	40.50	50.60	10.10	5.68	4.28	<0.01

Note: Scores were based on a 100-point scale.

Table 3 illustrates the impact of digital learning tools on the development of practical agricultural skills. The experimental group, which used digital tools, showed a significant improvement in



Impact of Digital-Learning Tools on ... Mahmud, W. Et. al. (2025)

practical skills, with a mean score increase from 40.75 (pre-test) to 72.40 (post-test), resulting in a mean difference of 31.65 (SD = 7.12). This difference was statistically significant ($t = 14.45, p < 0.001$), indicating that the use of digital tools had a substantial positive effect on skill development. In comparison, the control group, which received traditional instruction, showed a smaller improvement in practical skills, with a mean increase from 40.50 (pre-test) to 50.60 (post-test), resulting in a mean difference of 10.10 (SD = 5.68). This difference was statistically significant ($t = 4.28, p < 0.01$), but the effect was considerably less pronounced than in the experimental group. These results suggest that digital learning tools significantly enhanced students' practical agricultural skills compared to traditional teaching methods.

Research Question Four:

How does the retention of agricultural knowledge differ between students taught using digital learning tools and those taught using traditional methods?

Table 4: Retention of Agricultural Knowledge Between Digital Tools and Traditional Methods

Group	Post-Test Mean	Retention Test Mean	Mean Difference	Standard Deviation	t-value	p-value
Experimental Group (Digital Tools)	75.80	74.10	1.70	4.32	1.45	0.15
Control Group (Traditional Methods)	52.90	47.60	5.30	3.98	4.22	<0.001

Note: Scores were based on a 100-point scale.

Table 4 presents the retention of agricultural knowledge between students taught using digital learning tools and those taught using traditional methods. The experimental group, which received instruction through digital tools, showed a slight decrease in mean scores from 75.80 (post-test) to 74.10 (retention test), with a mean difference of 1.70 (SD = 4.32). This difference was not statistically significant ($t = 1.45, p = 0.15$), indicating that students in the experimental group retained their knowledge relatively well. On the other hand, the control group, which was taught using traditional methods, experienced a more substantial decline in retention, with a mean score decrease from 52.90 (post-test) to 47.60 (retention test), resulting in a mean difference of 5.30 (SD = 3.98). This difference was statistically significant ($t = 4.22, p < 0.001$), suggesting that students in the control group had poorer retention of agricultural knowledge compared to those in the experimental group. These results indicate that digital learning tools contribute to better retention of agricultural knowledge over time compared to traditional teaching methods.

Research Question Five:

What challenges are encountered in the implementation of digital learning tools in agricultural education in rural schools?

Table 5: Challenges in the Implementation of Digital Learning Tools in Agricultural Education

Challenge	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Lack of electricity	85	85.0
Poor internet connectivity	80	80.0
Inadequate teacher training	70	70.0
Limited access to digital devices	65	65.0
Resistance to change from teachers	45	45.0
Insufficient technical support	40	40.0

Note: Frequency represents the number of respondents who reported each challenge.



Impact of Digital-Learning Tools on ... Mahmud, W. Et. al. (2025)

Table 5 presents the challenges encountered in the implementation of digital learning tools in agricultural education in rural schools. The most frequently reported challenge was the lack of electricity, with 85% of respondents identifying this as a major barrier to effective use of digital tools. Poor internet connectivity followed closely, with 80% of respondents highlighting this issue as a significant hindrance. Inadequate teacher training was also a prominent challenge, cited by 70% of respondents, indicating that many teachers lacked the necessary skills to effectively integrate digital tools into their teaching practices. Other challenges included limited access to digital devices (65%), resistance to change from teachers (45%), and insufficient technical support (40%). These findings underscore the infrastructural and training-related barriers that must be addressed to successfully implement digital learning tools in rural agricultural education settings.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of digital learning tools in enhancing agricultural knowledge acquisition and skill development among secondary school students in rural Northern Nigeria. The results indicate that the baseline agricultural knowledge and skill levels of students were moderate to low, which aligns with previous studies that have highlighted the challenges faced by rural students in accessing quality education, particularly in specialized fields like agriculture (Adewale & Ibrahim, 2021). The moderate baseline knowledge and low skill levels suggest that traditional teaching methods have been insufficient in bridging the educational gap in rural areas. This finding is consistent with the broader literature on agricultural education in rural Sub-Saharan Africa, where students often lack access to updated learning resources and practical training opportunities (Olayemi & Adebayo, 2021). The introduction of digital learning tools, therefore, holds the potential to address these gaps by providing more engaging, interactive, and accessible learning experiences.

The significant improvement in agricultural knowledge acquisition observed in the experimental group, which used digital learning tools, further supports the growing body of evidence on the effectiveness of digital tools in education. This result is in line with studies by Nwosu et al. (2022) and Patel et al. (2022), who found that digital tools, such as mobile apps and virtual simulations, significantly enhance students' understanding of complex subjects, including agriculture. The experimental group's knowledge increase of 30.60 points, compared to the control group's 8.05 points, highlights the superior impact of digital tools over traditional methods. This finding also emphasizes the relevance of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), which suggests that students' perceived usefulness and ease of use of digital tools directly influence their learning outcomes (Davis, 1989). The significant improvement in knowledge acquisition suggests that when digital tools are integrated effectively into the curriculum, they can facilitate better understanding of agricultural concepts, which is crucial for the development of a skilled agricultural workforce.

In terms of practical skill development, the study found that students in the experimental group demonstrated a remarkable improvement, with a mean increase of 31.65 points in their practical skills. This result mirrors findings from other studies, such as those by Olayemi and Adebayo (2021), which showed that virtual reality (VR) and mobile apps enhance practical learning by allowing students to engage with real-world scenarios in a controlled environment. The hands-on experience provided by digital tools enables students to apply theoretical knowledge to practical situations, which is essential in agricultural education. In contrast, the control group's smaller improvement of 10.10 points suggests that traditional methods may not offer the same level of interactive and experiential learning opportunities. The results underscore the potential of digital tools to bridge the



Impact of Digital-Learning Tools on ... Mahmud, W. Et. al. (2025)

gap between theoretical knowledge and practical skill development, which is critical for students in rural areas who may not have easy access to physical agricultural training resources.

The retention of agricultural knowledge was another key area of interest in this study. The findings indicate that students in the experimental group retained their knowledge better than those in the control group. The slight decline in knowledge retention in the experimental group (1.70 points) compared to the larger decline in the control group (5.30 points) supports the idea that digital learning tools contribute to better long-term retention. This result aligns with the Constructivist Learning Theory, which emphasizes the importance of interactive, learner-centered approaches in promoting deep learning and retention (Piaget, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978). The ability of digital tools to provide continuous access to learning materials and foster active engagement may explain why students in the experimental group were able to retain more of what they had learned. The findings suggest that digital tools not only enhance immediate learning outcomes but also contribute to sustained knowledge retention, which is essential for the long-term development of agricultural skills.

Despite the positive outcomes, the study also identified several challenges in implementing digital learning tools in rural schools. The most significant challenges included a lack of electricity, poor internet connectivity, inadequate teacher training, and limited access to digital devices. These challenges are consistent with those reported in other studies on digital education in rural areas (Adewale & Ibrahim, 2021; Nwosu et al., 2022). The lack of electricity and internet connectivity are particularly problematic in rural Northern Nigeria, where infrastructure is often underdeveloped. Furthermore, the insufficient technical support and resistance to change from teachers highlight the need for comprehensive training programs and ongoing support to ensure the successful integration of digital tools into the classroom. These challenges must be addressed if digital learning tools are to be effectively utilized in agricultural education. The findings suggest that policymakers and educators must prioritize investments in infrastructure, teacher training, and digital resources to overcome these barriers and fully realize the potential of technology in agricultural education.

Conclusion

The results of this study demonstrate the significant potential of digital learning tools to improve agricultural knowledge acquisition, practical skill development, and knowledge retention among secondary school students in rural Northern Nigeria. The findings underscore the importance of integrating technology into agricultural education to bridge the gap between traditional teaching methods and the demands of modern agricultural practices. However, the challenges identified in the study highlight the need for targeted interventions to address infrastructural and training-related barriers. Future research should explore the development of context-specific digital tools and strategies to enhance the effectiveness of agricultural education in rural areas, particularly in regions with limited access to resources.

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.64348/zije.2025210>

Impact of Digital-Learning Tools on ... Mahmud, W. Et. al. (2025)

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