Learning Spanish Online during the Lockdown in Nigeria: Challenges and Prospects

Purity Ada Uchechukwu
Department of Modern European Languages
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
ap.uchechukwu@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

In spite of the growing number of internet users in Nigeria, the classroom method persists in foreign language education. However, because many young Nigerian students of foreign languages are keying into the internet as a reliable source for foreign language learning, this paper examines the attempt by students studying Spanish as a foreign language in a Nigerian public university at using Yabla, an online Spanish language platform during the Lockdown in 2020. The overall findings reveal that while Yabla is a commendable platform for learning Spanish because it is multitasked; the actual challenges the students encountered are rooted in general infrastructural deficit in power supply, internet accessibility and high cost of data. What this means is that the average student of foreign languages in Nigeria's public universities is deprived of continuous learning through the use of information technology. With the future of learning now geared towards the virtual class, the paper recommends an overhaul of the electricity and telecommunications sector, and massive investment in the creation of platforms to facilitate the online learning of foreign languages in general, in Nigerian public universities.

Keywords: *Learning Spanish online, Spanish in Nigeria*; *Yabla Spanish, Lockdown, Classroom method*

1. Introduction

Studies show that in the present, fast digitalization of the world, information technology and the internet have become imperative in tertiary institutions (Rena 2008) such that internet-based learning is facilitating the internationalization of education (Reeder et al., 2004). The African continent in today's globalized world is exposed to this trend with its estimated 334 million of its young people and potential lifelong learners having access to the Internet according to International Telecommunications Union, ICT Facts and Figures (2016).

This rapid growth is also true for Nigeria where the number of internet users rose to 103 million in May 2018 (https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/more-news/274828-nigerias-internet-users-hit-103-million-ncc.html). However, a closer look shows that these "internet users" include subscribers who pay for internet access (dial-up, leased line and fixed broadband), and people who have access without paying directly, either as a member of a household or from work, school, a public library or internet café (Ndiomewese, 2017). This system of "subscribing" to the internet is understandable considering the average income in the country and the high cost of internet connectivity.

On the other hand, and as observed by Internet for Education in Africa Report (2017), access to the Internet and heavy use of social media has not been harnessed systematically to advance

education and learning at individual and institutional levels in many African countries. This is also the case in Nigeria where a good number of the country's internet users do not seem to avail themselves of the core benefits of this media within the domain of foreign language education; but instead some abuse the technology for cybercrime and other negative activities (see Umeogu and Ojiakor, 2016; Jegede and Olowookere, 2016).

Even so, as efforts to promote the use of online resources in foreign language teaching in the African continent continue (Internet for Education in Africa 2017), and a student has more chances to communicate with someone living abroad through the internet than through traditional methods of communication (Gretter et al. 2016), students' authentic exposure to foreign languages and cultures is occurring increasingly in digital environments (Kessler, 2013). In line with this trend, this paper presents an attempt at using Yabla, an online Spanish language platform to learn Spanish at home during the Lockdown in 2020. This research was deemed important for students studying Spanish as a foreign language to encourage them to keep on learning without the physical class they are accustomed to; more so, as Spanish is neither heard nor spoken in the Nigerian environment. The paper is arranged as follows: section 2 gives a brief overview of learning Spanish in Nigeria and the search for an alternative to the classroom method. Section 3 summarizes literature on the use of information technology in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The questionnaire method used is explained in section 4. Section 5 presents the findings of students' experiences with the Yabla Spanish platform. Section 5 goes into discussions on the challenges students encountered during the Lockdown, while section 6 forms the conclusion.

2. Learning Spanish in Nigeria and the Classroom Method

Foreign language studies should actually be a well-developed field in Nigeria, but certain conformities adopted in the education system create some hurdles. For example, the prime position assigned to the French language for bilateral and economic reasons is still evident in French being the *de facto* foreign language; a stand which impacts unfavourably on student's exposure to, and learning of, other foreign languages (Arabic being an exception in the North because of the influence of Islamic education).

Thus, while the average Nigerian student of foreign languages makes very early contact with the French language from elementary (mostly in private schools) through secondary school, and also in the institutions of higher learning (colleges of education, polytechnics, and the universities), this same student has no such early exposure to other foreign languages until he/she gains admission into the university, where the contact takes the form of General Studies

Courses (GS) or electives.

With regard to Spanish, the language was introduced as an elective course in the university under study in 2010 (Uchechukwu 2014; 2016). Based on the curriculum, all students major in French and choose either Spanish or German as an elective. As part of the curriculum, the students must go on a compulsory Year Abroad Programme to a Francophone country in their third year. Hence, the elective foreign languages are not taught for a whole year because of the compulsory immersion programme. This means that students learn the elective foreign language for three years only, that is, first, second and final year.

The Spanish class takes the form of the classroom method: a mixture of lecture style with an audio CD that accompanies the course book, *Teach Yourself Spanish* (2007). This was the most affordable and readily available material for the students at that time; and served as teaching and learning material from 2010-2013. A change of didactic material in the 2014/2015 academic year introduced *ECO* (2013) as the new course book. But as Riskawat et al (2021) point out, "teachers of these days can no longer be dependent just on textbooks or course books…if they want their teaching to be motivating and successful" (p. 2). In this regard, the fundamental changes that information technology brings to the societies for transformative purposes (Cummins, 2000) had to be explored, and the new approach had to be such that accompanies the students in their independent learning of Spanish aided by technology-based language tools.

It was observed that most students possess android phones which they use for chatting, watching videos and sending WhatsApp messages during the physical Spanish class. As a matter of fact, the use of Android phones "… to exchange education-related messages and academic files with classmates, search the Internet and library databases for academic materials, practice online quizzes or tests and hold discussions with classmates among other activities" (Shonola et al, 2016) is very real in Nigerian universities. Therefore, Android phones (see Stockwell 2007, p. 380 for the limitations) offer a great opportunity for foreign language learning in Nigeria and pave a pathway forward as the research on the use of Edomodo by Oyelere et al (2016) reveals. And from the point of view of necessity and cost effectiveness, students can easily download essential course materials, then go offline, and only go briefly online again to submit assignments, thereby saving some amount of data for online oral classes. Consequently, *ECO* (coloured e-book) and accompanying audio files were installed in the android phones of all students for the Spanish class. This step was a big change from using the photocopied course book, because the original version of the book was not affordable for most students; also, the black and white photocopies did not support visual learning like the coloured

e-book.

While the installation curbed distractions during the class, the assistance of the teacher was still necessary to monitor and assist in the proper use of the device in the classroom. The physical class came to an abrupt end when Nigerian universities were officially closed on 23rd March, 2020 due to the outbreak of the dreaded Coronavirus in the country.

However, and before the Pandemic, several efforts had been made to employ information technology in teaching in institutions of learning in Nigeria. The next section reviews the literature on some of these attempts made.

3. Literature Review

Several studies have been conducted on the use of information technology in the education sector in Nigeria. Some of these have observed the impact of Information Technology and the use of ICT in secondary schools (Aduwa-Ogiegbaen, Okhion and Iyamu 2005; Anikweze and Chibuzo, 2018), adult education (Oguzor and Adebola 2011), university undergraduates (Ogungbeni et. al 2016; Umar, Mahmud and Jalil 2018; Ajegbelen, 2016), as well as the general perception of Nigerian youths to the use of information technology in learning (Jabeen and Thomas 2015; Gadanya, 2015). This section reviews some of these studies, and highlights the gap which this current effort intends to fill.

Aduwa-Ogiegbaen, Okhion and Iyamu (2005) examined ICT from the perspective of the use of the computer to enhance teaching various subjects, especially with large classes. The authors conclude that learners can be accurately and systematically instructed, with focus on thinking skills with carefully prepared computer programme, and that computers promote individualized learning which can bring about a change from the traditional lecture method.

Oguzor and Adebola (2011) dwelt on E-learning for adult educators in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Their research on the whole, listed the benefits of E-learning to academic adult educators.

Viatonu and Elusakin (2012) investigated the prospects and challenges on how to improve the teaching and learning of English Language through the use of information and communication technology. Apart from citing the benefits of using information and communication technology in virtually all areas of teaching and learning, the suggestion was that ICT should be integrated into the teaching and learning of English for a more rewarding teaching-learning process.

Jabeen and Thomas (2015) looked at the learning trends of students who choose online language courses in order to assess the effectiveness of learning a language online. The results brought

to light challenges such as lack of learning prospects for speaking, and the fact that students must find ways to make contact with the instructor. The conclusion is that the lack of learning prospects for speaking leads to less frequent interactive sessions which impinge on the overall effectiveness of language learning.

Gadanya (2015) understudied the perception of Nigerian students towards the role of ICT in enhancing learning ESL. The findings show that most students do not use ICT for learning, even though a lot of them have positive perceptions of ICT; such as enhanced communicative competence, development of writing, reading, listening and speaking skills as well as vocabulary. The researcher calls for an inclusion of ICT into the language classroom.

Ogungbeni et. al (2016) in examining internet use among undergraduates in Nigeria, looked at the role of policy. The authors conclude that the internet has assumed the role of a virtual library in serving as an alternative to scarce and out-dated library sources in many Nigerian universities.

Ajegbelen (2016) focuses on the benefits of ICT in universities as a way of improving the quality of teaching and learning; with suggestions for this to be realized. However, unlike the other studies, the author mentions the digital divide and gave suggestions for closing the gap.

Umar, Mahmud and Jalil (2018) discuss identified obstacles to ICT usage in Nigerian tertiary institutions, and suggested the provision of consistent electricity supply, training and ICT refresher courses and establishment of ICT centers to curtail cyber- crime etc.

Anikweze and Chibuzo (2018) enumerated on the good prospects for the use of ICT in teaching and learning in secondary schools in Nigeria. No practical examples were provided, but recommendations given for teachers to use the computer to enhance educational efficiency especially in handling large classes of students and be utilized for individualized learning in secondary schools in Nigeria.

Ayelaagbe and Bello (https://www.globalacademicgroup.com/journals) highlight the use of information and communication technology in teaching and learning French in Nigerian schools. The authors extolled the advantages of ICT in the teaching and learning of French, as well as the ICT resources that can be used to teach and learn French.

Deductible from the attempts made before the Pandemic is an absence of a practical use of a specific technology-based platform or tool to learn a foreign language. And although Opaluwah's (2020) research describes the pressures experienced in teaching French during the Pandemic Lockdown, the author also did not use any web-based language platform to demonstrate as a solution or alternative.

This present study intends to fill this gap by presenting the attempts of students in a Nigerian

public university at using Yabla, an online Spanish language platform to learn Spanish at home during the Lockdown. It also includes the challenges they encountered, and suggestions for the future of learning Spanish online in Nigeria.

Even though Zuppo (2012) explains that "diverse applications of the term ICT exist within several contexts and treatments of the term" (p. 13), this study uses Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in the sense of online language tools for foreign language learning The next section introduces the Yabla Spanish language Platform.

4. The YABLA Spanish Platform

When Yabla Inc. reached out to schools with an offer of a *90-day free Yabla* trial, it came at a time when the classroom method could no longer hold, and all Nigerian students were already at home because of the imposed nationwide Lockdown.

Yabla (http://www.yabla.com) is an online foreign language learning platform. It is also described on the website as an immersion workbook with which students can improve their language acquisition skill by exposing them to real life native speakers through consistent spelling and vocabulary practice. Generally, Yabla is subscription based. But the free three-month Yabla offer provided an opportunity for continuous learning of Spanish at home, and the Platform with its multi task features such as multiple-choice questions, fill in the blank exercises, vocabulary training, comprehension, and the inbuilt dictionary amongst other features (Fig. 1), was a welcome change to motivate students to continue learning while at home.



Fig. 1 Activities in Yabla Spanish

All students were encouraged to go through all the activities (irrespective of their level). The goal was twofold: The first was to keep students interested in learning and practicing Spanish

during the Lockdown. As such, the stipulated submission dates of the given assignments were not to be rigidly adhered to.

Secondly, to find out if students in a Nigerian public university can learn Spanish with an online language tool at home without the assistance of the lecturer.

4.1 The Lock-down Yabla Spanish Class

To get started, the teacher had to follow three major steps to be able to access the platform. These steps begin with:

1. Creating a username/password via www.yabla.com/free to activate the account.
2. Name the classes by clicking on the username pull down menu at the top right corner of the home page, select "Classes", and "Create a new class".
3. Add students to the classes. The teacher can add students to the created classes by clicking on "Manage School Account" in the username pull down menu, then clicking on "Invite Students". This link marked "students" was copied and sent to all students via their emails. On its own, the Yabla platform automatically creates a signup link for every school so that students could easily add themselves to the classes. From this link, students could find their school on a list, create a username, and be automatically linkedto their class/teacher.

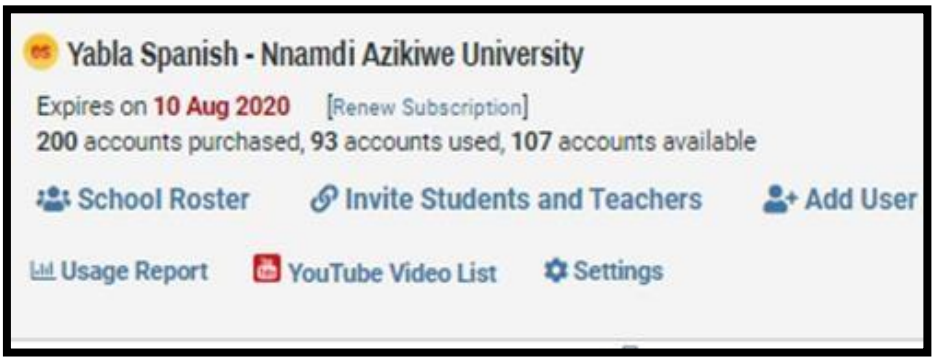


Fig. 2: Yabla Spanish Class Account

4.2 Participants

Three classes were created for students according to their levels: Elementary SPA 101 (Beginners class), Intermediate SPA 201 (Intermediate class), and Advanced SPA 301 (Advanced class). The classes were designated for 100, 200 and 400 level students respectively. The registration records show that Elementary SPA 101 had a total of 46 students, while 18 students logged into SPA 201, and a total of 30 students registered for SPA 301. In all, 94 students were registered as participants on the Platform.

Meanwhile, the regular Spanish class before the Lockdown had a total of 145 students (all levels

combined).



Fig. 3: Elementary SPA 101



Fig. 4: Intermediate SPA 201



Fig. 5: Advanced SPA 301

The difference in the number of registered students reveals that a total of 31 students did not log in at all into the Lockdown-Yabla Spanish class. This study concentrates on the groups that could register and participate in the class.

As the aim of this exercise was to find out how students can continue to learn Spanish at home using Yabla during the pandemic, no scored tests were assigned; and even though students were given deadlines to submit assignments, these were not considered for this analysis. Instead, at the end of the free access three-month period, an online questionnaire was distributed to all students who registered for the classes to sample their opinion on their experience with learning Spanish online using Yabla.

4.3. Method

An online questionnaire was generated using *surveymonkey* (https://www.surveymonkey.com/). Students were to respond to a total of five out of ten (10) questions via the link *https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/YSY8FRL*. (Questions below with '*'). Only the responses to question 1, and questions 7-10 were analysed as they fit into the two-fold goal of the study which excludes assessing or scoring students' assignments and their adherence to time to turnover such exercises.

On-line Questionnaire

1. *Could you log into the site?
2. Were the lessons appropriate for your level of Spanish?
3. Did you have enough time for all the assignments?
4. Which assignment was easiest?
5. Which assignment was most difficult?
6. Would you have needed more time for the assignments?
7. *Could you afford data to go Online?
8. *Did you have power supply to be Online?
9. *Did you have to source for credit for data?
10. *What was the greatest challenge to doing the assignments?

4.4. Volume of Responses and Analysis

Against a total of 94 registered students, only 63 responded to the online questionnaire. Moreover, because of the restriction on free *surveymonkey*, only 40 responses out of 63 were made accessible for use in this investigation.

The volume of responses as indicated below show that feedback from a total of 63 students were realised between 22- 24 August, 2020; a month after the expiration of the 90-day free trial period. It reveals that the highest response from students (almost 20%) was recorded on the 22nd of August with a decreasing tendency from the 23rd (less than 15%) to final responses (below 10%) on the 24th of August.

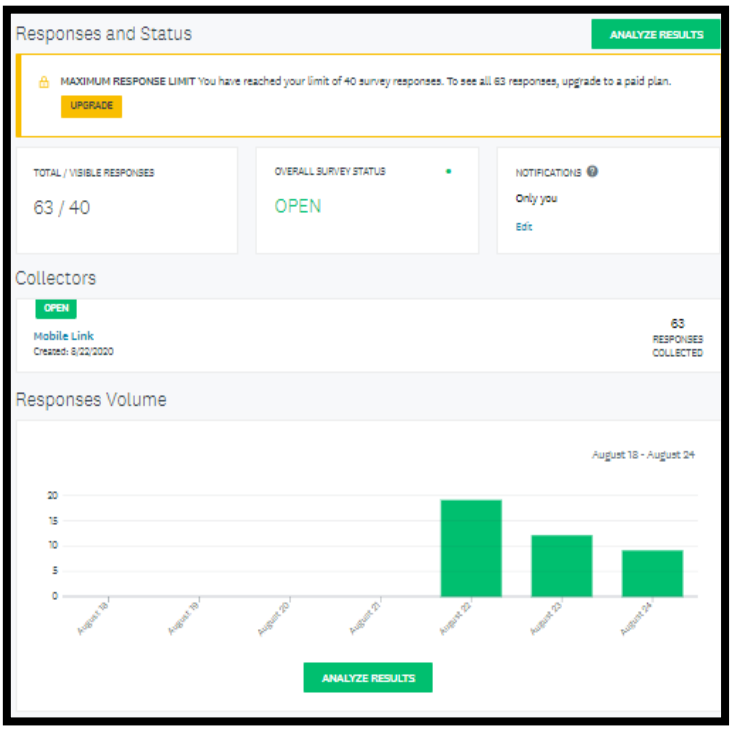


Fig. 6: Volume of Responses

4.4.1 Analysis

Unlike the registered volume of responses which totalled 40, the captured responses had an even lesser number (Table 1). An exception is question (1) where all forty (40) students responded to the first question. Otherwise, there were feedbacks totalling 16 for the remaining four (4) questions (7-10). Twenty four (24) students skipped the questions:

Question number	Questions	Yes	No		Other
1	Could you log into the site?	29	8	Answered: 40 Skipped: 0	3 invalid responses
7.	Could you afford data to go online?	5	6	Answered: 16 Skipped: 24	-Not really (3x) -Not at all times. At some point I had data challenge. Wasn't able to afford -Well sometimes and the other times I couldn't afford data I was late to submit on due dates -Not all the time -Not all the time

8.	Did you have power supply to be online?	7	4	Answered: 16 Skipped: 24	-Well sometimes, as Nigerians we know power supply are (sic)scarce -not always (2x) -Sometimes -Not really -Not all time
9.	Did you have to source for credit for data?	10	3	Answered: 16 Skipped: 24	-Yes and due to covid19 I had to manage whatever I get -Yes I did, sometimes I had to do the night Subscription, cause it cheaper
10.	What was the greatest challenge to doing the assignments?			Answered: 16 Skipped: 24	-I didn't do it -Network service (2x) -data, network and not being able to play the videos -Data and power -Phone. My phone was bad. -Data (4x) -Having to listen almost 10 times to grab the Spanish -Time, data, and indiscipline from my end. But Time and data were the greatest. Cause I enjoyed the assignments, and wish to continue -Not understanding the words

Table 1: Responses from students

***Could you log into the site*?**

All forty (40) participants responded, even though three (3) students provided invalid answers. The responses disclose that logging into the site was generally not a problem at all although three (3) provided invalid answers. The answers show that logging into the site was generally not a problem.

***Could you afford data to go Online*?**

The answers were varied. Common to all however, was the fact that most students replied that

they could not always afford data.

**** Did you have power supply to be Online?***

With regard to power supply, the answers show that this was not always available and hindered some students from going online.

**** Did you have to source for credit for data?***

Some students made do with what they could afford, and others devised cheaper means such as night subscription.

**** What was the greatest challenge to doing the assignments?***

The answer was unanimous: poor/lack/erratic power supply, high cost of data for internet, and slow/zero internet connectivity.

5. Discussions

Going by the concept of digital indicator as explained by Rena (2008), an increase in the number of internet users is an indication of the level of information technology adoption in a country. At face value, this may seem the case with Nigeria's tremendous increase in the number of internet users. More so, as the country at the end of 2018 ranked 7th globally for internet subscribers, ahead of the likes of Russia and Germany, with over 110 million monthly subscribers (https://www.stearsng.com/article/overpriced-why-nigerians-pay-so-much-for-data).

However, this growth in the number of internet users does translate to a general adoption of information technology in every sector. The Nigerian education sector, especially foreign language learning, is yet to benefit from this development as this study reveals. The results obtained from the students' attempts to use Yabla during the pandemic substantiates Pejovic et al.'s (2012, p. 2468) claim that the expanse of activities relating to information technology are still evolving in the Nigerian context due in part to the bandwidth divide.

This issue of the bandwidth divide is one of the problems associated with the use of informationtechnology in Africa as a whole, especially as it affects effectiveness in the three important areas of connectivity, capacity and content (Rena, 2008. p.13). And since all three are dependent on one another, the general lack of, and high cost of supporting infrastructure results in low penetration in the continent (Brewer et al., 2000).

Furthermore, studies of this lack of supporting infrastructure for information technology in the Nigerian context show that only about 40% of Nigerians are connected to the national grid, and even those who are, have access to power less than half of the time (Mellersh as cited in

Olatunji, 2018). Add to this an estimated 41% electrification rate which translates to approximately 100 million people in the country living without access to electricity (ADF, 2013). Nigeria is clearly burdened with enormous power problem. And depending on certain circumstances, or how weak the infrastructure is in one's neighbourhood, the situation could range from manageable, to very bad.

On slow internet connectivity, Speedtest Global Index in October 2020, ranked Nigeria 118th worldwide on mobile internet speed, with a download speed of 16.93 mbps (megabytes per second) only (https://www.speedtest.net/global-index/nigerian#mobile). This means that internet subscribers in Nigeria are provided with internet services that run at a much slower speed than the global standard.

An additional point is that Nigerians pay a lot for data. Alliance for Affordable Internet (2019) concludes on this that the cost of 1GB must be more than 2% of the monthly income in Nigeria (https://www.stearsng.com/article/overpriced-why-nigerians-pay-so-much-for-data). But in a country where not all the 36 states of the federation pay the minimum wage of ₦30,000 (https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/more-news/416441-8-states-yet-to-implement-new-minimum-wage-tuc.html), this not only means that most Nigerians are poor, but that also, to buy data of 1GB at ₦1,000 is a lot for the average citizenry that includes students. This overpricing of internet access is substantiated as some participating students shared data, while others decided on nightly subscription which they claimed to be cheaper.

Slow connectivity and overpriced internet access is a huge loss for Nigeria's education system because internet access can expand the educational capacity for the country by making education cheaper; and the most obvious and devastating effect is that the high cost of data means exclusion from the internet (Alliance for Affordable Internet, 2019). This exclusion from the internet is confirmed in this study as some students were unable to participate in the Yabla Spanish class; giving credence to Ajegbelin's (2016) statement that for those groups that are unable to cross the technology divide, ICT is yet another means to further marginalize them.

In the power sector, Olatunji (2018, p. 13) points out that because most of Nigeria's power generating facilities are operating at low efficiency, the consequences are high cost of electricity and overdependence on the national grid. However, the country's transmission and distribution network could be technically reviewed to accommodate renewable energy such as wind, solar, biomass, all connected to the national grid. Therefore, exploiting alternative sources of energy will reduce the cost of electricity and overdependence on the national grid, and consequently reduce the cost of data. In line with the suggestions of Alliance for Affordable Internet (2019), the cumulative effect of this development would lead to increase in data affordability and effectiveness, development of

broadband plans and strategies on the part of the internet service providers; while on the part of the government, an increase in the average income would enable more people to afford data (https://www.stearsng.com/article/overpriced-why-nigerians-pay- so-much-for-data).

Thus, while the internet is one of the key tools in bridging a digital divide between the rich and poor because it integrates students into a global culture, and accessibility to electricity on its part, allows lower-income people to access communication, as well as a variety of educational delivery opportunities (Norris, 2001, p. 16), the fact that one is practically dependent on the other explains why even after several investigations into the use of information technology in the education system in Nigeria, the challenges of power outages/fluctuations, expensive internet data, low bandwidth and sometimes zero connectivity still persist. These factors also impinged on students' participation in the Yabla Spanish class during the Lockdown.

6. Conclusion

The findings in this study reveal that the challenges encountered with online Spanish learning during the Lockdown could be traced to the traditional approach to foreign language teaching, a method which renders the foreign language class less lively and glorifies the elevation of the foreign language teacher to the role of an authoritative source (Inyang, 2017, p. 132). This has taken on the form of "a culture transmitted from generation to generation…" (Akawu, 2009, p. 89). Unfortunately, this culture persists not only in primary and secondary schools, but also in institutions of higher learning (Gadanya 2015) in Nigeria.

What this implies is that the average Nigerian student learning Spanish was completely left behind during this period of online learning, webinars, zoom conferences, etc., even though the global employment market today considers proficiency in Spanish as a marketable skill necessary to develop a presence in a globalized world (Gretter and Gondra 2017, p. 92).

Unfortunately, the classroom method continues after the Lockdown and reopening of Nigerian universities. This is because as Arikpo et al (2009, p. 203) rightly observed, "no matter how big the dream to conquer the ICT world may be, if the current epileptic power supply persists, everything will end up in the hands of a few privileged Nigerians who can afford power generators, and hence a failure to bridge the gap…"

In all, the challenges encountered in learning Spanish online during the Lockdown reveal that the digital divide between the rich and poor in Nigeria's education sector is on the increase and foreign language learning in Nigerian public universities is not yet in tune with 21st century foreign language learning methods.

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