

Using ICT to Improve Local Dialect of Béchar

Par **Chellali BENACHIBA**/Université de Béchar

Boutkhil GUEMIDE/Université de Jijel

I-Introduction:

It is not surprising, therefore, that the percentage of adults living in Béchar who use Shelha as a significant language of communication with their native speakers of the dialect is decreasing. The fact also reveals that the quality of Shelha being spoken now has greatly diminished.

One of the contributing factors to this diminishing in the quality of the language nowadays is the rapid loss of the number of native speakers in households – particularly older folk. After independence, there has been a great change in demographics which saw mass urbanization of the population of the region and the transformation of their households from rural village-based extended families to urban families. This phenomenon had a decimating effect on Shelha and culture as the native speaking grandparents were more often than not left behind.

Consequently, it is no real surprise today to find that many of the exemplars of Shelha in the radio and television media are youth who have learnt and mustered Shelha as a second language. From these people, it is not uncommon to hear the use of poor grammar, euphony and pronunciation through the airwaves. One effect of this phenomenon is the perpetuation of such errors within the greater population.

It was due to the concerns over the diminishing language quality of Shelha language delivery that the research project outlined in this paper arose.

II- Bechar: Geographic and Historical Background:

Bechar is one of the oldest cities of Algeria. It is located in a strategic area of southwestern Algeria. It is a crossroads of Mediterranean civilizations and Africa. The city is located 950 km southwest of the capital Algiers, an area of over 5000 km² with more than 2000 hectares of farmland. It is bordered by Naama in the North, El Bayadh in the East, Adrar and Tindouf in the South, and Kingdom of Morocco in the West. It is surrounded by a mountain range of:

- Djebel Antar; 1953m
- Jebel Grouz; 1835m

- Djebel Bechar; 1206 m.

Historically, the name of the city “Bechar” means “hope” or “good news” when looking for water. It was subjected under the French colonization in 1903, and was formerly named after a French General, in the army, Colomb- Béchar. The city was once the site of a [French Foreign Legion](#) post.

Before coal was found here in 1907, Bechar was a small populated town. It thrived on the activity of the coal mines until [petroleum](#) production seized the market.

The city is noted for its [leatherwork](#) and [jewelry](#), [dates](#), [vegetables](#), [figs](#), [cereals](#), and [almonds](#) are produced near Bechar. Bituminous coal reserves in the region are not exploited to their greatest potential because of high transportation costs. The climate is hot and dry in summer and very cold in winter, rainfall not exceeding 100 m per year. The population is estimated at more than 251,657 inhabitants in 2005. Apart from the weather and the phenomenon of distance, the town of Bechar does not differ from one city in the north; it has a domestic airport, a university, a bus station and railway station, a sports stadium, a cultural center, swimming pool, and several hotels and youth hostels of high quality.

The power plant (commonly known by the people CENTRA) located midway between Bechar and Bechar Djedid, originates from the location of the coal power plant that produces electricity (110V) to Bechar, Bechar Djedid and Kenadsa. It is through her that the population has seen the artificial light for the first time.

As result of migration, tribes started to settle in the sub- Saharan region in Algeria. Those people decided to stay in the South of Algeria because of some strategic reasons: to look for security for themselves and their properties. People belonging to the same family used to live in what are known today in “Ksours”. They used to live on, primarily, agriculture, sheep rising, and some handcrafts. The architecture of “Ksours” in Bechar looked different from kings’ palaces; it reflected the peoples’ conception and means used in building ksours (Kouari, 2008, p. 10).

The term “Ksar” means an inhabited place of the high plateaus on the surface of the earth; it consists of a group of standard houses having the same shape and color, surrounded by a great and high wall, and round Bruges above the doors on both sides of the entrance of the “ksar” (Akab, 2007, p. 18).

The primary conditions in building “ksours” were:

- ✚ Strategic location that ensures security,
- ✚ Abundance of water for life continuity and better exploitation in agriculture,

For the aforementioned reasons, some “ksours” were built on highlands; such as “Lahmar” and “Igli”, and others were built on the river sides; such as “Bechar”, “Kenadza”, and “Kerzaz” (Mabrouk, 2008, p. 11).

“Ksours” in Bechar were made of adobe, a thick fabric of red soil and water, so that it could make them live in harmony with weather. i. e. It has been proven that those fabrics could make the “Ksours” heat in time of winter and cool in time of summer. Each “Ksar” consisted of the basement and the first floor. What made the “ksar” specific at that era is that a room with a hole was used as “W. C.” for specific technique. After a period of four of five years, people used to put smoke on the matters for:

- ✚ Burning the waste matters, and
- ✚ Using them afterwards as a fertilizer in agriculture,

III-Sociolinguistic situation:

Algerians' official language is Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), and people learn it at school from the primary to the secondary levels. As elsewhere, written MSA differs from the mother tongue spoken language. 72 % of Algerian people speak in their daily life the Darija, "Algerian Arabic". They are variants stemming from the ethnic, geographical and colonial occupiers influences as: Spanish, French, Turkish, Italian, etc. That, within Algerian Arabic itself, there are significant local variations (in pronunciation, etc.) observed from town to town even they are near to each other. In addition to the Darija, 28% of inhabitants speak Berber language. However, some of Algerians use in their life French language. (Droua-Hamdani, G., Selouani, S. A., Boudraa, M., and Boudraa, B., p. 1).

As far as Southwestern Algeria is concerned, the dominant spoken language is Maghrebi Arabic. Several distinct Berber varieties are spoken alongside Arabic (Galand, 2002): Taznatit in the Gourara region around Timimoun and sporadically further south (Boudot-Lamotte, 1964; Mammeri, 1984; Bellil, 2006); in the upper Saoura valley and the Ksour Mountains, a number of closely related Zenati varieties collectively known in older linguistic literature as "kcours du sud-oranais" (Kossmann, 2010); and the more distantly related Tamasheq (transcriptions here are based on Heath 2006), spoken by the traditionally nomadic Tuaregs around Reggane, Adrar, and In-Salah. All of these non-Arabic languages (with the partial exception of Tamasheq) are indifferently termed šəlha "Shelha".

South Oran and Figuig Berber is a Zenati dialect group spoken in a number of oases of southwestern Algeria, as well as nearby ones in Morocco. These include most of the ksour between Mecheria and Béni Abbès: Tiout, Ain Sfisifa, Boussemgoun, Moghrar, Chellala, Asla, Fendi, Mougheul, Lahmar, Boukais, Ouakda, Barrbi near Taghit, Igli, and Mazzer in Algeria, and Figuig, Iche and Ain Chair in Morocco (Kossmann, 1997, p. 1).

The table below shows approximately the number of people speaking “shelha” in the the region of Bechar.

<u>Local area</u>	<u>N° of shelha speaking</u>	<u>Distance from Béchar city</u>	<u>Principal activity</u>	<u>Type</u>
Moughal	2000	50 km	agriculture	Palm trees
Lahmar	2500	35 km	agriculture	Palm trees
Boukais	2000	60 km	agriculture	Palm trees
Ouakda	1500	05 km	agriculture	Palm trees
Taghit	6000	90 km	agriculture	Palm trees
Igli	4000	160 km	agriculture	Palm trees
Beni Ounif	6000	110 km	agriculture	Palm trees

IV-The importance of “Shelha” and implications for ICT:

As the information revolution worldwide becomes increasingly multilingual, and as the presence of the new ICTs in Africa extends to larger areas beyond the capital cities, there is a growing need to accommodate the use of diverse native languages and greater potential to tap the linguistic wealth of the continent for development and education.

It is generally agreed that the availability of software and content in the languages most familiar to users is an essential element in the adoption and optimal use of computers and the internet. One might add that in the context in which people may speak several languages, the option of using different languages is also empowering. Accommodating the languages most familiar to people is a consideration of primary importance in any efforts to use ICT for development. This should come as no surprise, as education and

communication are generally easier in the first language (L1) than in languages that people acquire later. Furthermore, at a community or societal level, L1s are considered a central and indispensable aspect of social and cultural systems.

ICT was originally introduced to Africa and Arabic-speaking regions in English and French, as well as in Portuguese and Spanish in certain sub-Saharan countries. The same languages, of European origin, were used in colonizing these regions and have served as official languages since their independence, especially south of the Sahara. One of the problems of relying on ELWCs is that a large majority of people on the continent either do not speak these languages or do not speak them well. Even if they did, having computer access and internet content only in ELWCs would be a limitation to populations that also speak other languages (Osborn, 2010, p. 5).

In any event, the use of ICT in Africa's indigenous and native languages should not be considered merely as a means of compensating for people's lack of knowledge of ELWCs, nor as a second-best or interim solution for such people until knowledge of ELWCs increases and improves. It is also a question of fairness with respect to access, which is a long-term practical issue, since it is difficult to imagine that Africans, any more than the populations of any other region, would universally be comfortable or efficient in using ELWCs in ICT to the exclusion of their L1s.

Using ICT in Africa's indigenous languages is a solution that also opens up new possibilities for more effective use of the technology by the most highly educated, thus complementing and expanding upon the potential offered by applications in ELWCs (Don, 2010, p. 6).

Thanks to new technologies, people can now get access to "shelha" online through different public forums. However, there are many limitations that are found which do not help to promote the use of shelha. This has led us to think of a research project to be used in order to enhance the use of shelha online perfectly.

V-Description of the research project:

The research project uses archival recordings of elderly native speakers of shelha as its primary source of data. It will be fortunate that the local Radio of Bechar to start recording native speakers of the dialect with the realization that such speakers were dying out at an alarming rate and the day would come when such voices would become quite

rare. Besides, great efforts should be made to enhance the longevity of these recordings by digitizing the reel-to-reel and cassette recordings and storing them in a vault. Currently the station should start downloading the largely CD collection onto external drives for storage.

The research project concentrates particularly on elderly people. Their voices are the exemplars that we need to counter the 'damage' created by the youthful voices and to help 'bring back' the language of the ancestors of the people of Bechar. One particular advantage of the recordings selected for use for the project is that they are recordings of conversations, not monologues, narratives or speeches. It is for such natural conversational Shelha that learners are yearning.

The two broad research objectives are to produce a 'talking book' and to produce a template for Shelha using the actual voices of native speakers of the language. The proposal for funding was to publish a hard copy book and distribute it to tribal members along with a set of 20 CDs of the recordings.

With the beginning of the project, there will be a major development in terms of utilizing the voice recordings for learning Shelha by the youth. We have always realized that the whole process can be enhanced by the use of ICT. In terms of dissemination, this is a major departure to what was proposed in the original research proposal.

1) Production of a 'talking book' as a learning resource:

The primary research objective is to produce a hard copy 'talking book'. Essentially, a 'talking book' is a set of written texts with accompanying sound recordings. The research material has been selected from a collection of over 2000 oral recordings of various elders from the different regions of Bechar. The focus is on twenty hour-long recordings from a radio show featuring two elderly native-speaking women conversing in Shelha. The intention is to focus on different elders and to highlight differing dialectal variations from across the tribal region. One reason is that the radio station had plentiful recordings of the pair – hence providing the researchers with a large sample and corpus of material for processing and analysis. Another reason is because their language was regarded as being particularly high in quality and rich in terms of figures of speech, idiomatic sayings and so on.

Outlined below is the research process proposed for the duration of the project:

-  Select appropriate oral recordings,

- ✚ Develop brief biographies of the two subjects,
- ✚ Transcribe 20 oral recordings,
- ✚ Provide footnoted annotations and explanations,
- ✚ Create a master copy of a ‘talking book’,
- ✚ Use specific software to analyze transcriptions and list common verbs, nouns, idioms, and dialectal features,
- ✚ Translate the transcriptions into French, and
- ✚ Design a template for a radio course using the material.

On completion of the project, the beneficiaries will gain access to oral recordings with transcriptions that will enable them to read along with the recordings and so ideally improve their pronunciation and euphony. The provision of translations into English will enable learners to match up the spoken word, the written Maori text, and the translation. Consequently, the integration of the functions of language – listening, reading, speaking and writing will be activated and in doing so, will ideally contribute to the accelerated improvement in the dialect skills of learners.

Furthermore, the close analysis will enable the students to listen with a more critical ear and read with a more critical eye. A particular focus in the analysis phase is to identify and resurrect idiomatic sayings based on the premise that it is these expressions that are the first victims of language loss, as compared to narrative statements for example. Another focus of the analysis is on maintaining local dialects. The desired end-result is that there will be a vast improvement in the quality of the dialect being used by the people today.

As mentioned earlier, since the commencement of the project, it has been realized that the whole teaching and learning process can be enhanced by the use of ICT. It is now intended that the ‘talking book’ inclusive of MP3 files of the full hour-long recordings be placed online.

2) Using radio broadcast to promote Shelha:

The secondary research objective is to produce a template for a radio Shelha course using the material processed during the research project. It will be designed and produced by Radio Saoura, the local radio broadcasting station, and then to be produced in studio by the radio station and distributed to the people via an internet network.

As part of the course design, actors reading their scripts in Shelha will be recorded. A literal Arabic language version will also be recorded– showing how the sentences are

constructed with the thought that this would assist language learners to construct Shelha sentences. Then a third version was recorded– a ‘proper’ French language version. All three versions appear in the student text book in three columns set side by side and in parallel with one another.

Then an instructor’s voice was added. The instructor would instruct the listening students to repeat phrases– with the actors, for example, and after the actors. This process will really make quite easy using Cool Edit Pro. A sentence or paragraph of spoken script could simply be copied and pasted in order to replay it, in the same manner that any written text could be copied and pasted.

It is envisaged that a similar approach to that described above will be made with the recorded conversations of our two elderly women, in the production of web-based courses. However, the scripts will be the real life conversations between the people speaking Shelha. The rich voices and language used by the native people will bring true authenticity. The rise and fall of their voices, the use of filler words and non-verbal sounds will all be authentic– as will their subject matter. Again, software like Cool Edit Pro will be used to manipulate the material to our advantage.

Once the web-bound courses have been designed and produced in the studio, they can also be delivered by radio as well as online. For the course to be most effective, learners will need to have access to a textbook that they can actually view.

3) The benefits of using TV broadcast:

It has already been said that TV transforms the world to people in image and sound. For this reason, students, in the case of foreign language learning, are always asked to exploit the different materials provided by TV. They have to see movies and documentaries broadcasted in the language of origin, in addition to listening to songs and other series.

In this field, studies have already shown and emphasized on the positive impacts that are generally associated with educational programs designed to engage pre-school children and enhance learning outcomes, such as letter recognition or other pre-literacy skills. In New Zealand, for example, many of these studies have been conducted on *Sesame Street* and the impact on language and other cognitive skills gained by preschoolers through viewing *Sesame Street* (Baydar et al., 2008).

One children’s program broadcast on Maori Television is *Miharo*, a curriculum-based television series aimed at five-to-eight-year olds, which was first aired in 2008. Each

show is based around a particular theme, such as light, air, the human body, and food. The theme is explored in six curriculum areas (science, social studies, maths, health, arts and technology). The show has two Maori presenters, male and female, and Maori children who introduce interactive games and talk a little about their own schools. The program provides an opportunity for families to support the learning of their children through co-viewing (Lonsdale, 2010, p. 23).

A popular Maori language program, *Pukana*, is a visually energetic and interactive show that has been on air for more than ten years. It offers a variety of content, including music, comedy, celebrations, and visits to external sites, sport and practical life skills. While aimed at Maori-speaking children between eight and 14 years of age, the actual audience is said to range from six to sixty (Michelle).

The program effectively combines entertainment and educational intent. The New Zealand Ministry of Health noted the role of the show in promoting healthy eating habits and the Ministry of Economic Development has used the show to promote the Consumer kids website to children (Michelle, 2010, p. 25).

Adult viewers can also gain in confidence or content knowledge from this co-viewing. While there is little if any research into the television co-viewing habits of Indigenous families, there is evidence to show that Indigenous parents and caregivers already share a range of activities with their children, including watching television, videos and DVDs. As a visual medium, television is an appropriate educational tool to use with Indigenous children as can be seen from existing television programs in New Zealand and Canada (Michelle, 2010, p. 30).

As far as local dialect of Bechar, it is impossible to ask for a local TV to broadcast its programs in shelha. Although there exists a Berber TV as a channel of the Algerian National TV, it only concentrates on local dialect spoken in Kabylia region in the North of Algeria. For this reason, we propose that the Berber TV should broadcast day to be left for the local dialect of Bechar, Shelha. Through this measure, many people and viewers will know more about Shelha of Bechar and how does it differ from the other Berber dialects in Algeria. Moreover, viewers will know more about the culture and traditions in the region. Besides, the directors of Berber channel may allow and provide courses to be broadcasted on TV for learning Shelha as far as viewers are interested in.

4) How can a web site improve Shelha?

The importance of the Internet in teaching foreign languages in today's language teaching settings becomes more and more. The role of this media becomes more important by helping students to practice their language skills as well as becoming familiar with the culture of the language community, especially when there is no immediate access to the native speakers.

Internet is one of the most recent and advanced tools in education which has been provided to the education environment by the advance of technology. Although there are some downsides to having access to the Internet for students and learners, if it is used effectively and under teacher supervision, it can be a good source and tool in delivering education.

This is especially the case with teaching languages. The Internet can be useful with any skill area in learning a foreign or second language. It is a great resource in practicing language skills. However, it is more effective with some skills more than others. For example, in speaking and listening it is more effective than in translation. It is also a good resource for the teacher to find lesson materials and resources. It also helps the students to become familiar with different aspects of the culture of the language they are learning.

In the case of the local dialect of Shelha in Bechar, it is suggested to have a particular website for the purpose of promoting and improving the dialect. It will serve the following benefits for people:

- 🚩 **Listening:** Anyone who logs onto the web-site will have the ability to listen to recordings of conversations made by people of the region. Besides, the visitors will also listen to short stories told by the people.
- 🚩 **Speaking:** In addition, the visitors will be able to chat with either the people speaking Shelha, or interact with them so as to learn and know more about the dialect and its history.
- 🚩 **Writing:** If visitors want to practice writing Shelha, they will have access to large resources that provide different words together with phonemic transcription and their meanings.
- 🚩 **Watching:** the visitors will also have the opportunity to watch different videos of people speaking Shelha subtitled so that they can understand the focus of the video and what does it talk about.
- 🚩 **Using a dictionary:** Within the web-site, there is a dictionary that will help visitors

to know more about the meanings of the words written in Shelha. The word, for instance, is written in Shelha, between parentheses its translation in both Arabic and French, and then its meaning.

The web- site will surely provide an important feedback to the research approach. It will also help and motivate visitors through:

- ✚ Having an easy and fast access to the native speakers,
- ✚ Chat rooms are good for practicing the language. However, finding friendly chat sites is difficult,
- ✚ People on chat sites give us time to speak as they understand we are learning the language,
- ✚ Learning about the region country and its culture on the Internet is vital,
- ✚ The Internet puts faces to all the strange names that we never learned and makes things more interesting and easier to understand,
- ✚ Keeping up with native speakers on the screen is a good challenge,
- ✚ Talking to the real people of the dialect on the net is exciting,

Conclusion:

The original research proposal to improve Shelha at The University of Bechar for funding is to publish a hard copy book and distribute it to people in the region who are interested in learning the dialect, along with a set of 20 CDs of the recordings. This data would be used to design and produce different Shelha courses to be delivered by radio. The latter realization that the whole process can be enhanced by the use of ICT has presented the researchers with a major opportunity indeed.

By placing the ‘talking book’ online complete with full hour-long recordings as MP3 files; and by placing an actual Shelha course online; increases accessibility to this most sought after resource exponentially.

This development is an unexpected bonus for the researchers and for the Shelha seeking beneficiaries. The replication costs for an unknown quantity of books and 20 CD sets of recordings are potentially incredible. On the other hand, an online publication and online MP3 files are not constrained by numbers of copies. The placement of the completed resource package online creates huge cost savings and avoids the other major challenge of the efficient distribution of hard copies along with the associated administrative costs.

Consequently, anyone anywhere will be able to potentially access the online resource – whether in Bechar or elsewhere. People can learn Shelha from the mouths of the natives speaking people from just about anywhere in the world. And any number of people can do this.

Individuals can access it at times to suit their individual circumstances. They do not need to travel anywhere but learn in the comfort of their own homes and at their own pace. They can replay the recordings at their own discretion. A teacher is not required. What is required is a computer with a good sound system and a student with high motivation to learn the Maori language. Hence through ICT applications of these recordings of elders from the native people of the region, the learning process for potential students of Shelha will be hugely enhanced.

References:

- Akkab, Mohammed Tayeb. (2007). *Houses of Ksours in Kenadza: Archological and Architectural Study*. Algiers: Dar Al Hikma.
- Baydar, N., Kagitcibasi, C., Kuntay, A. C., & Goksen, F. (2008). Effects of an Educational Television Program on Preschoolers: Variability in Benefits. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 29 (5), 349-360.
- Bellil, Rachid. (2006). *Textes Zénétés du Gourara*. (Documents Du CNRPAH 2). Algiers: CNRPAH.
- Boudot- Lamote, Antoine. (1964). Notes ethnographiques et linguistiques sur le parler berbère de Timimoun. *Journal Asiatique CCLII*.
- Droua-Hamdani, G., Selouani, S. A., Boudraa, M., and Boudraa, B. (n. d) *ALGASD PROJECT: Statistical Study of Vocalic Variations according to Education Levels of Algiers Speakers*. www-users.york.ac.uk/~sh581/droua%20hamdani%20et%20al.pdf
- Galand, Lionel. (2002). *Etudes de linguistique berbère*. Leuven, Peeters.
- Kossman, Marteen. (1997). *Grammaire Parler de Figuig: Maroc Oriental*. Peeters.
- Kossman, Marteen. (2010). *Grammatical Notes on the Berber Dialect of Igli (Sud Oranais, Algeria)*. In Dymitr Ibrizsimow, Marteen Kossman, Harry Stroomer, & Rainer Vossen (Eds.), *Etudes berbères V- Essais sur des variations dialectales et autres articles*. Koln: Rudiger Koppe.
- Lonsdale, Michelle. (2010). *Using Television to Improve Learning Opportunities for Indigenous Children*. Indigenous Education. Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). http://research.acer.edu.au/indigenous_education/20

- Mammeri, Mouloud. (1984). *L'ahellil du Gourara*. (Publications du Centre d'Etudes Et De Recherche Amazigh (CERAM) 1). Paris: Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, avec le concours du Centre National des Lettres.
- Osborn, Don. (2010). *African Languages In a Digital Age: Challenges and Opportunities for Indigenous Language Computing*. Cape Town, South Africa: HSRC Press.
- Kouari, Mabrouk. (2008). "Ksours in the South- west: Urbanization and lifestyle". *Al Athar*: Magazine published by the Direction of Cultural Affairs of Béchar. N° 2, Ain Mlila, Oum el Bouaghi: Dar el Houda.