

Vocabulary Input in Algerian Primary-School Textbooks of English: The Case of *My Book of English*, Year 3

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ABSTRACT

In the light of the initiation of EFL teaching in Algerian primary schools starting from the academic year 2022 – 2023, the present paper investigates the vocabulary size of the textbook of English designed for primary-school learners: *My Book of English*. Our study explores the frequency and range of lexical input included in the textbook by comparison with Nations' word list BNC/COCA2000 (British National Corpus / Corpus of Contemporary American English 2000). The results indicate that many of the headwords included in the coursebook are part of the BNC/COCA2000 word list, but with less recycling; a number of words are also considered low-frequent vocabulary and thus unnecessary for beginners. Another finding is that some useful words for beginners are not included in the textbook. The study concludes by suggesting a number of vocabulary selection criteria for textbook authors so as to make the lexical items more useful for primary-school learners in the future editions of the textbook.

KEYWORDS: EFL; coursebooks / textbooks; vocabulary / lexical input; word list; textbook / coursebook evaluation

1. INTRODUCTION

In EFL classrooms, English textbooks serve as instructional resources and are certainly the cornerstone of language programmes as they provide effective input for language learners (Sheldon, 1988; Richards, 2001). It is maintained that, for EFL learners outside of English-speaking countries, textbooks content and teachers talk serve as the primary sources of vocabulary development (Milton, 2009; Alsaif & Milton, 2012; Ghosn, 2014). Yet, the lexical input included in coursebooks may be challenging or less beneficial for EFL learners if it is not selected conveniently. In fact, vocabulary selection is among the criteria of designing and evaluating coursebooks.

Analysing the needs of learners is the first stage of developing language programmes and materials; this is a preliminary step to maximise the learning intake. As for textbooks, diagnosing vocabulary needs is deemed important for the sake of helping learners acquire the necessary vocabulary corresponding to their intended level or exit profile (Milton & Alexiou, 2020). Learners are not supposed to acquire whatever word so as to reach the intended level by the end of the instruction (Milton & Alexiou, 2020). There must be a selection of items for successful vocabulary learning especially for beginners. The criteria of selection may take into consideration the frequency, utility, familiarity, and abstractness or concreteness of words.

In this paper, we investigate the vocabulary size of EFL textbooks designed for young learners; particularly, we consider the problematic of which words are most useful for primary-school learners and thus worth including in textbooks. This will be achieved by assessing the vocabulary of the textbook designed for Algerian learners of English in the primary school: *My Book of English*.

We aim at answering the following questions:

- What is the quantity and quality of vocabulary included in the textbook *My Book of English*, Year 3 of Primary School?
- What are the criteria adopted by the textbook authors in selecting the lexis of the coursebook?

2. Lexical Input in EFL Textbooks of Beginners

Vocabulary input of textbooks has to be selected by taking the level of learners into consideration. Beginners, for example, need basic and practical vocabulary which would help them use the language in familiar situations related to their close interests.

As for the annual intake of vocabulary, there are different estimations of the amount of lexical size recommended for young learners. Saudi learners of English, for example, are expected to learn approximately 250 words in Grade 4 – the initial year of learning English (Ministry of Education, n.d.). Milton (2009, p. 77) stated that Hungarian learners are supposed to learn 350 words in Grade 3 – the first year of EFL learning. As for Webb & Chang (2012), they suggested that learning 400 words per year is feasible for all schoolchildren with a possibility of achieving 500 words. Similarly, Dang &

Webb (2016b) compiled a word list for beginners that includes 800 useful headwords to be learnt over two years. As for native speakers, it is reported that they might expand their vocabulary repertoire by 1000 word families per year (Nation, 2014, p. 7).

By reviewing the relevant literature on vocabulary size, there are different estimations of recommended vocabulary for EFL learners; we summarize the findings in what follows:

- According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), the objective for A1 learners is to have a “basic vocabulary repertoire” relevant to “concrete situations” of communication (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 131); that range is estimated at around 1500 lexical words (Table 1).

Table 1. Vocabulary Size by CEFR Levels

CEFR Level	Vocabulary Size
A1	<1500
A2	1500–2500
B1	2500–3250
B2	3250–3750
C1	3750–4500
C2	4500–5000

Source: Milton, 2009, p. 186

- Nation & Newton (1997, p. 239) argued that the 2000 most frequent words of English must be prioritized because “without these it is not possible to use English in any normal way.”
- Schmitt & Schmitt (2014) categorized the first 3000 word families as being *high-frequency* vocabulary and thus ideal for EFL teaching. The next boundary of word families (3000 – 9000) is said to be *mid-frequency* vocabulary; beyond that level, vocabulary is considered *low-frequent* and thus less useful to be included in learners’ materials.
- Nation (2013) indicated that for a text coverage of 95%, the required vocabulary is 3000 – 4000 word families; as for a coverage of 98%, the range is 6000 – 9000 word families.
- Laufer & Ravenhorst-Kalovski (2010, pp. 25–26) suggested a minimal threshold for *reading with some guidance* at the range of 4000 – 5000 words, and an optimal lexical threshold for *independent reading* at the range of 6000 – 8000 word families.

It appears that the band of 2000 – 3000 word families consists an ideal size for EFL learners. In this respect, one of the best high-frequency word lists for L2 learners is BNC/COCA 2000 which is considered as an alternative to the General Service List compiled by West in 1953.

With a total of 2000 word families, the BNC/COCA list provided the largest lexical coverage across written and spoken corpora (Dang & Webb,

2016a) and was considered quite useful in teaching and learning the basic vocabulary of English (Dang, Webb & Coxhead, 2022). In their evaluation of word lists, Dang & Webb (2016a, p. 151) recommended the use of the first 1000 words of the BNC/COCA word list for L2 vocabulary learning because “it offers L2 learners the best return for their learning effort.” This particular word list is going to be used as a reference in our vocabulary assessment of the primary-school textbook of English *My Book of English*.

3. Method

The present study is corpus-based; it is intended to investigate the quantity and quality of vocabulary included in the coursebook “*My Book of English, Primary School Year 3*” to determine its suitability for learners’ needs of basic communication.

3.1 My Book of English (Primary School, Year 3)

The textbook *My Book of English* (MBoE) is part of a series of textbooks designed for learners of English as a foreign language in both primary and middle schools. My Book of English is the very first book used by beginners to learn English in Algerian primary schools; it is composed of a pre-sequence and 6 sequences with a total of 62 pages (see Table 2).

Fig. 1. Front Cover of the Textbook *My Book of English*, Year 3

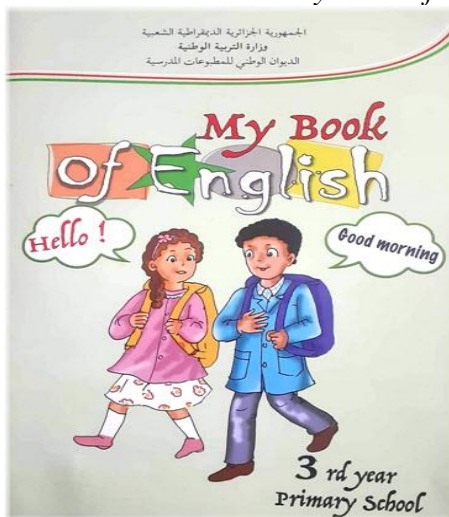


Table 2. Sequences of the Textbook: My Book of English, Year 3

Sequences	No. of pages
PRE-SEQUENCE	2
1. ME, MY FAMILY AND MY FRIENDS	11
2. MY SCHOOL	11
3. MY HOME	8
4. MY PLAYTIME	7
5. MY PETS	7
6. MY FANCY BIRTHDAY	11

The textbook has been in use in primary schools since the academic year 2022-2023 following the decision of the Algerian Ministry of National Education to teach English as a foreign language in primary schools starting from Grade 3 (third-year primary school) instead of Grade 6 (first-year middle school). Such decision reflects a ‘fast-forwarding’ transformation in the status of English in Algeria especially after the recent multifaceted changes in the country (political, social, educational, ...).

3.2 Data Collection & Analysis Procedures

The investigation of the lexical items included in *My Book of English* is important to assess their suitability for beginner learners; the aim is to measure the ‘lexical sophistication’ by calculating the percentage of infrequent words in the textbook (Milton, 2009, p. 131).

To investigate the range and frequency of the textbook vocabulary, all the words have been extracted from cover to cover. After that, the frequency of the lexical items has been calculated using a vocabulary analysis program called RANGE, which is a user-friendly software that helps in analysing and counting the lexical load of different texts; it is available from the website of Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand: <https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/lals/resources/paul-nations-resources/vocabulary-analysis-programs>.

It is worth noting that plural nouns have been treated as being singular so as to avoid double counting the same word type, and contractions have been rendered into their original format, e.g. I’m → I am; it’s → it is; where’s → where is.

The size of the textbook vocabulary has been compared with Nations’ BNC/COCA2000 list which is a well-known word list that was extracted from the British National Corpus as well as the Corpus of Contemporary American English.

4. Results and Discussion

After analysing the data, the total number of tokens in the textbook was found to be 2300 running words. As for types, there were 328 different words, in addition to 14 proper names of people. In our discussion of results, we consider a number of aspects as regards the selection of vocabulary in the textbook: inclusion in BNC/COCA word lists; lexical recycling; minimal pairs; French cognates; regional variety; and cultural connotations.

4.1 Inclusion in the BNC/COCA Word Lists

The table below illustrates the number of tokens and types included in the textbook in comparison with the BNC/COCA word lists.

Table 3. Types and Tokens Being Part of the BNC/COCA 2000 Word List

BANDS	No. of Tokens	No. of Types	Examples
1 st 1000 Headwords	1871 (82%)	223 (68%)	<i>book; cat; I; mother; white...</i>
2 nd 1000 Headwords	180 (8%)	49 (15%)	<i>activity; apple; biscuit; pen; toy...</i>
TOTAL	2051	272	

As can be seen from the table above, 68% of the textbook word types are part of the 1000 most frequent word families of the British National Corpus and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (BNC/COCA). By considering the next 1000 threshold of the same corpora, the percentage raises to 83% of word types being part of the BNC/COCA 2000 word list. In other words, we can say that nearly 90% of the tokens appearing in the coursebook are part of the most frequent words in English language.

However, a note of caution is due here because of the absence of simple yet essential words for young learners, such as *morning, night, new, bad, before, after, now, little, like, know, and because*. Moreover, the names of months and seasons were not included in the textbook either (see the appendix). The absence of such words might be considered as a shortcoming since they are essential for basic communication situations. Surprisingly, we noticed the appearance of the word ‘*morning*’ on the front cover of the textbook (Figure 1).

As for the rest of word types beyond the 2000 threshold of the BNC/COCA word list, they are presented in Table 4. It is argued that the threshold of 2000 is considered more than enough for beginners, and that beyond such band words are thought to be less useful for learners in their initial year of learning English.

Infrequent and less useful words such as *bill* (i.e. beak), *ferry, rug, vet, intruder, vine, fin, gem, kite, vat* are better deleted from the textbook. Instead, recycling of more useful vocabulary is a better alternative. Yet, there are a number of words which are considered less frequent but very useful to beginners to communicate in everyday situations. Examples include *candle, pencil, robot, spoon, umbrella, alphabet, bathroom, bedroom, birthday, orange, and schoolbag*. Milton (2009, p. 29) cited the examples of *giraffe* and *tiger* which can be learnt at the beginning by younger learners although they are not quite frequent in adult corpora.

Table 4. Vocabulary Beyond the 2000 Band of the BNC/COCA Word List

BANDS	No. of Types	Word Types
3 rd 1000 Headwords	4	<i>code; geography; net; vast</i>
4 th 1000 Headwords	12	<i>bull; candle; civics; ferry; fork; grid; pencil; robot; rug; spoon; tick; vet</i>
5 th 1000 Headwords	8	<i>ant; eraser; intruder; pea; tablet; umbrella; vest; vine</i>
6 th 1000 Headwords	8	<i>alphabet; fin; gem; kite; mini-; pear; puppets; soda</i>
7 th 1000 Headwords	0	–
8 th 1000 Headwords	1	<i>beep</i>
9 th 1000 Headwords	1	<i>crayon</i>
10 th 1000 Headwords	1	<i>canary</i>
Beyond the 10,000 range	18	<i>Algiers; Arabic; bathroom; bedroom; birthday; English; French; goldfish; handwriting; Islamic; London; oh; phonics; playtime; schoolbag; timetable; vat; wow</i>
Off List	3	<i>copybook; fennec; pictionary</i>
TOTAL	56	

Another finding is the inclusion of the past simple and the present continuous verb forms even though they do not have a priority in the first coursebook of English for primary school learners. For instance, the tongue twister “*a fat vet felt fine under the vine*” (MBoE, p. 60) contains less frequent words as well as the past tense of the verb *to feel*. Also, the sentence “*he is sitting next to his sister*” (MBoE, p. 31) contains the present participle *sitting* appearing four times on the same page although the verb *to sit* is not included at all in the textbook.

Overall, the selection criteria of vocabulary in EFL / ESL materials can be based on personal judgments of teachers and material writers of useful words apart from word frequencies criteria. By way of illustration, Schmitt et al. (2021) suggested the knowledge-based vocabulary lists which are based on testing learners’ actual knowledge of words.

4.2 Lexical Recycling

Recycling of vocabulary, i.e. encountering and reusing words in new situations, is considered as a requirement in teaching materials intended for beginners (Nordlund & Norberg, 2020). The findings indicate that nearly 47% of word types occurred only once or twice throughout the textbook (Table 5); this might cause a difficulty in retaining lexical items for beginner learners. For new vocabulary to be consolidated, the number of occurrences is estimated at 3 – 4 times (Zahar et al., 2001). Such an issue is another shortcoming in the present textbook as almost half of the word types are not recycled sufficiently.

Table 5. Word Types Occurring Once or Twice

No. of Occurrences	Word Types
Once n = 94	<i>about; arts; bear; bee; bin; biscuit; bull; bush; candle; cheek; civics; class; code; cream; cut; days; drink; eat; eating; fancy; feather; felt; ferry; fine; for; fox; frogs; from; gem; geography; grandparents; grid; hide; home; hot; ice; intruder; iron; Islamic; join; juice; key; lamb; learn; lip; make; members; mini-; Mr; Mrs; net; offer; oh; ok; orange; pan; parents; pea; pear; physical; pie; pin; pink; playtime; point; pop (out); pull; push; put; replace; rocks; sails; sea; seek; shape; snake; soda; something; stops; technology; tent; them; top; tree; umbrella; us; vast; vat; very; vest; vine; week; wow; zero</i>
Twice n = 58	<i>Algiers; ant; apple; bed; beep; bill; by; chick; choose; complete; cross; cup; education; fan; fast; fat; first; fork; four; Friday; glass; good; grandfather; grandma; grandmother; grandpa; hair; his; history; how; knife; London; Monday; nine; old; page; paper; plate; pleasure; puppets; rug; sad; schoolbag; seven; sitting; speak; spoon; Sunday; sweet; thanks; Thursday; time; timetable; Tuesday; van; vet; Wednesday; yes</i>

4.3 Minimal Pairs

Further analysis of the data reveals the existence of a number of headwords which are considered minimal pairs, such as *pin, bin, fin; fan, van; pen, pet; ant, and; pull, bull; push, bush; car, cat; cheek, chick; cup, cut; ear, eat; fat, vat; top, toy; fast, vast*. Those particular words could pose a problem of pronunciation and retention for first-time learners of English because of the close similarity in pronunciation as well as orthography.

4.4 French Cognates

The choice of some words in the coursebook suggests that one of the criteria for vocabulary selection is the similarity in spelling with French words. As the French language is frequently used in Algerians' daily lives, textbook authors may have considered that the inclusion of many cognates in the textbook could be a positive factor that would assist Algerian ESL / EFL young learners with a faster acquisition of vocabulary. Table 6 presents a number of headwords which look similar in both French and English.

Table 6. Examples of Cognates included in MBoE

Word	French Cognate
<i>activity; air; alphabet; art; biscuit; canary; cat; chair; circle; class; code; colour; correct; crayon; cream; education; face; garden; member; project; robot; scene; toilet; train; vast</i>	<i>activité; air; alphabet; art; biscuit; canari; chat; chaise; cercle; classe; code; couleur; correct; crayon; crème; éducation; face; jardin; membre; projet; robot; scène; toilettes; train; vaste</i>

4.5 British or American?

By considering the variety of English used by the textbook authors, it appears that the British variety was preferred to the American one in spelling, lexical, and grammatical selections. In what follows, we give a number of examples.

- The headword *vest*, referring to the piece of underwear, is used mainly in British English (BrE). In American English (AmE), it is rather *undershirt*.
- The verb *tick*, meaning to mark with a tick (✓), is *check* in AmE.
- *Flat*, referring to a residence, becomes *apartment* in AmE.
- *Bin* is mainly British, as in *waste bin* or *dustbin*.
- *Biscuit* in BrE, but *cookie* in AmE.
- *Garden* in BrE, but *yard* in AmE.
- *Timetable* in BrE, but *schedule* in AmE.
- *Toilet* in BrE, but *bathroom* in AmE.
- The British spelling was used in three words, namely *colour*, *favourite*, and *mum*.
- The grammatical form *have got* is usually used in BrE to show possession, as in *I've got a small face* (MBoE, p. 57), *Katia has got a pet* (MBoE, p. 48), and *Have you got a pet?* (MBoE, p. 47)

4.6 Cultural Considerations

As language and culture are closely interrelated, we think that the inclusion of certain headwords in the textbook is related to some cultural considerations. For example, the inclusion of the word *fennec* referring to the small animal living in the Sahara Desert can be justified as being the national animal of Algeria (World Atlas, 2017) as well as being one of the nicknames of Algerian national football team.

As regards the proper names used across the textbook, the inclusion of the name *Tin Hinan* is considered advantageous so as to raise learners' awareness of their local identity as the name refers to the queen of Tuareg tribes in the Ahaggar, South of Algeria (Ilahiane, 2017, p. 202).

As for cities included in the coursebook, only *Algiers* and *London* were mentioned as the places of living of two characters. No other city (whether Algerian or not) has been included in the coursebook; the name of the country

Algeria was not mentioned, either. The inclusion of other cities in addition to Algiers, the capital city, would be advantageous from an intercultural standpoint. After all, the textbook is intended for use in a vast country on a national scale.

Overall, we think that considerations related to the local culture are a good factor to be considered in vocabulary selection for learners. In the Algerian setting, words like *Sahara Desert*, *dates*, *Mediterranean Sea*, *Tunisia*, *Egypt*, *Africa* are quite useful for learners.

5. CONCLUSION

This study is pioneering in assessing the lexical size of the first textbook ever designed for primary school learners in Algeria during the academic year 2022–2023. In our investigation, we assessed the quantity and quality of the vocabulary used in the textbook. The results showed that many headwords are part of the top 2000 words of English, but they do not recur sufficiently throughout the textbook; recycling of vocabulary is necessary to ease its retention.

Furthermore, a number of simple and practical words were not included in the coursebook, such as *well*, *people*, *go*, *teacher*, *pupil*, and even *Algeria*. On the other hand, other infrequent and less practical words have been used, such as *bush*, *fin*, *ferry*, *intruder*, *pin*, *bin*, *rug*, *vine*, *vat*, *vet*, and *van*.

The findings of our study correspond with the results obtained by other researchers regarding the lexical input of Algerian textbooks in middle and secondary schools. Alhusban & Torki (2021) investigated all of the seven textbooks used in Algerian middle and secondary schools and found that Algerian textbooks of English are “above students’ lexical coverage” (p. 20). Similarly, Bouchair (2022) studied the lexical input in two textbooks designed for first-year and second-year middle-school pupils; she found that the lexis used in both textbooks is inappropriate and that “textbook designers did not consider . . . the principles of vocabulary teaching/learning recommended by vocabulary researchers” (p. 15).

For primary-school learners, coursebooks might include all the headwords of the Essential Word List (EWL) which is composed of 800 useful function and lexical words. In their study, Dang & Webb (2016b) argued that once learning the EWL lexical items, students are likely “to recognize over 60% of English words” (p. 163). Further research might explore the effects of learning such feasible number of words on vocabulary retention of young learners of English.

In sum, textbook writers are recommended to consider frequent and practical vocabulary as well as headwords relevant to the local culture with adequate recycling in order to enhance learners’ acquisition of EFL / ESL vocabulary.

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Appendix: Word Types in My Book of English (3PS)

Vocabulary Input in Algerian Primary-School Textbooks of English: The Case of My Book of English, Year 3

WORD	Freq.
a	48
an	3
about	1
act (out)	5
activity	13
again	3
air	4
Algiers	2
alphabet	6
am	12
is	72
are	8
and	144
answer	9
ant	2
apple	2
Arabic	4
arts	1
ask	5
at	11
bag	6
ball	4
bathroom	10
bear	1
bed	2
bedroom	15
bee	1
Beep	2
big	4
bike	4
bill	2
bin	1
birthday	7
biscuit	1
black	7
blue	5
book	7
box	8
brother	4
brown	3

bull	1
bush	1
by	2
bye	3

cake	3
canary	5
candle	1
capital	9
car	5
cat	5
chair	5
cheek	1
chick	2
choose	2
circle	8
civics	1
class	1
code	1
colour	20
coloured	3
complete	2
computer	3
copy	12
copybook	58
correct	3
crayon	5
cream	1
Cross	2
Cup	2
cut	1
dad	3
days	1
dining	4
do	8
dog	6
doll	5
Draw	14
drink	1
ear	4
eat	1
eating	1

education	2
eight	3
English	8
eraser	6
eye	3
face	3
family	3

fan	2
fancy	1
fast	2
fat	2
father	3
favourite	7
feather	1
felt	1
Fennec	4
ferry	1
fin	3
find	3
fine	1
finger	6
first	2
five	4
flat	4
for	1
fork	2
four	2
fox	1
French	3
Friday	2
friend	22
frogs	1
from	1
game	6
garden	5
gem	1
geography	1
glass	2
goldfish	3
good	2

got	11
grandfather	2
grandma	2
grandmother	2
grandpa	2
grandparents	1
green	5
grid	1
guests	4
hair	2
handwriting	6
happy	5
has	8
have	7
He	11
hear	5
hello	9
help	3
Hi	3
hide	1
his	2
history	2
home	1
hot	1
house	10
How	2
I	17
ice	1
in	88
intruder	1
iron	1
Islamic	1
it	20
join	1
juice	1
key	1
kitchen	9
kite	4
knife	2
lamb	1
learn	1
letter	32
lip	1

listen	86
live	4
living	5
London	2
long	6
look	46
make	1
match	8
maths	3
me	3
members	1
mini-	1
Monday	2
Mother	3
mouth	3
Mr	1
Mrs	1
mum	3
my	47
name	8
net	1
next	4
nine	2
NO	3
nose	3
number	11
of	12
offer	1
OH	1
OK	1
old	2
on	12
one	5
opposite	4
or	14
orange	1
out	6
page	2
pan	1
paper	2
parents	1
party	4
pea	1

pear	1
pen	10
pencil	9
pet	3
phonics	6
physical	1
pictionary	6
picture	21
pie	1
pin	1
Pink	1
plate	2
Play	6
playtime	1
please	6
pleasure	2
point	1
pop (out)	1
project	6
pull	1
puppets	2
push	1
put	1
rabbit	3
read	30
red	8
reorder	3
repeat	25
replace	1
right	7
robot	4
rocks	1
room	9
rug	2
Sad	2
sails	1
same	8
Saturday	3
say	19
scene	4
school	6
schoolbag	2
science	3

sea	1
seek	1
sentences	7
seven	2
shape	1
she	14
short	4
show	11
sing	8
sister	8
sitting	2
six	5
small	13
snake	1
soda	1
something	1
song	8
sound	13
speak	2
speed	3
spell	7
spoon	2
stick	6
stops	1
story	10
Sunday	2
sweet	2
table	6
tablet	3
tail	3
technology	1
ten	4
tent	1
thanks	2
the	189
them	1
there	9
this	6
three	4
Thursday	2
tick	6
time	2
timetable	2

to	16
toilet	3
top	1
toy	3
train	3
tree	1
Tuesday	2
two	8
umbrella	1
under	4
us	1
use	3
van	2
vast	1
vat	1
very	1
vest	1
vet	2
vine	1
Wednesday	2
week	1
what	12
when	6
where	8
white	3
with	23
words	18
WOW	1
write	11
yellow	3
YES	2
you	10
your	97
yourself	3
zero	1
Bakir	1
Hind	1
Kamel	1
Katia	1
Lilia	1
Lotfi	1
Mary	1
Meriem	4

Peter	2
Robotkid	4
Robotten	2
Sidou	2
Tin Hinan	1
Yassine	1
Σ	2300