



EXPLORING THE CLIL APPROACH FOR DEVELOPING SPEAKING FLUENCY IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

EXPLORANDO EL ENFOQUE AICLE PARA DESARROLLAR LA FLUI-DEZ ORAL EN EDUCACIÓN PRIMARIA

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ABSTRACT:

This study analyzes the impact of the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach on the development of English-speaking fluency among primary education students at Unidad Educativa Ecomundo Babahoyo, Ecuador. A mixed-methods design was employed, combining quantitative pre- and post-test assessments with qualitative data from observations, questionnaires, and teacher interviews. The study aims to determine whether CLIL enhances fluency, accuracy, complexity, and coherence in oral production compared to traditional instruction. Findings are expected to demonstrate significant improvements in communicative competence, contributing to evidence-based pedagogical practices in EFL contexts and supporting the implementation of CLIL in primary education settings.

Keywords: CLIL, Speaking fluency, Mixed-methods, Oral performance, EFL education.

RESUMEN:

La presente investigación examina la incidencia del enfoque de Aprendizaje Integrado de Contenidos y Lengua Extranjera (AICLE) en el desarrollo de la fluidez oral en inglés de estudiantes de educación primaria de la Unidad Educativa Ecomundo Babahoyo, Ecuador. Para ello, se adoptó un diseño de métodos mixtos que integró técnicas cuantitativas y cualitativas. En el componente cuantitativo, se aplicaron pruebas antes y después de la intervención; mientras que, en el componente cualitativo, se recopilaban datos mediante observaciones de clase, cuestionarios y entrevistas dirigidas a docentes. El propósito principal fue establecer si la aplicación del enfoque AICLE favorece aspectos como la fluidez, la precisión, la complejidad y la coherencia en la producción oral, en comparación con una enseñanza tradicional del inglés. Se prevé que los resultados evidencien avances relevantes en la competencia comunicativa de los estudiantes, aportando así fundamentos pedagógicos para fortalecer la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera y respaldar la incorporación del enfoque AICLE en el nivel primario.

Palabras clave: AICLE, Fluidez oral, Métodos mixtos, Producción oral, Enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera.



INTRODUCTION

In our increasingly interconnected world, proficiency in English speaking is not only a marker of linguistic competence but also a crucial skill for academic and professional success. In the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), speaking fluency (the ability to produce language smoothly, coherently, and accurately) remains a fundamental concern. Traditional teaching approaches often emphasize grammar and vocabulary in isolation, which may not promote authentic oral use nor sustained improvement in fluency. In response, the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach has gained prominence as a pedagogical innovation that integrates content subject instruction with language learning to facilitate meaningful communicative practice (Goris et al., 2019; Macaraeg et al., 2024).

Empirical evidence indicates that CLIL has a positive impact on varied areas of oral production. For instance, Macaraeg et al. (2024) found that oral production, motivation, listening skill, and critical thinking were augmented by CLIL for students. Similarly, Goris et al. (2019) documented CLIL-facilitated increases in L2 acquisition across diverse contexts. Moreover, a recent case study involving students showed that CLIL significantly improved speaking fluency when delivered via the use of pre-/post-test assessment strategies (Khosravi, 2023). The current evidence illustrates CLIL's promise for facilitating spontaneous and confident oral production for EFL students.

Despite these promising results, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding the particular effect of CLIL on speaking fluency in primary education settings. Most existing studies focus on secondary or higher education, often within different geographical and institutional contexts. As such, the goal of the present study is to address the effect of CLIL on the speaking fluency of primary education students at *Unidad Educativa Ecomundo Babahoyo*.

The current study will adopt a mixed-methods approach, wherein quantitative indexes of fluency (e.g., speech rate, coherence, pronunciation) are complemented with qualitative observations of learner and instructor perspectives. The aims are: (1) to establish a comparison of the speaking fluency achievement of the CLIL-taught and traditionally EFL-taught participants; and (2) to identify factors that intervene when fluency is developed within the framework of the CLIL methodology. The study aspires to provide empirical input for the selection of EFL teaching methods and curriculum development within the Ecuadorian primary education sector. The following theoretical framework synthesizes key perspectives that explain the relationship between CLIL and speaking fluency in primary education.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this study is primarily grounded in the underlying principles for Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), a dual-focus approach that integrates subject matter as well as language acquisition and consequently allows a mutually beneficial evolution between understanding of the discipline and target language (Coyle et al., 2010; Villabona & Cenoz, 2021). The CLIL approach is distinguished by the “Four C’s” Content, Communication, Cognition, and Culture (which together allow significant, context) appropriate use of language and build cognition (Coyle et al., 2010). Under CLIL settings, learners are introduced to authentic and intentional linguistic input, which elicits verbal output in natural settings.

Another relevant theoretical framework is Cummins’ distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). CLIL aims to develop both conversational fluency (BICS) and more sophisticated academic language (CALP), thereby fostering oral ability and conceptual complexity. This dual development is particularly important in primary education, where students are simultaneously consolidating basic communication and beginning to engage in cognitively demanding academic discourse (Gabillon, 2020).

Speaking fluency itself is routinely operationalized along more than one dimension: fluency (smooth, fast speech), complexity (lexical and syntactic variation), and accuracy (correct use of grammar and pronunciation). Research reveals that CLIL contexts prioritize fluency and complexity more evenly than accuracy, since they offer more content-mediated interaction and greater opportunities for spontaneous output (Khosravi, 2023).

Moreover, learner autonomy and self-regulation are discovered to be facilitators for CLIL’s success. Recent research finds that CLIL learners who adopt strong metacognitive strategies like planning, monitoring, and evaluating speech progress better in fluency and oral confidence (Lo, 2024).

Individually, these frameworks propose that the CLIL approach forms a sound base for promoting speaking fluency for EFL students by the integration of content-focused teaching, cognitive engagement, authentic communication, and strategies. In the particular context for Unidad Educativa Ecomundo Babahoyo, the model assumes that oral fluency would be enhanced by CLIL integration in the form of meaningful acquisition of the content, interactivity between dialogues, and cognitive processing with language—dimensions that are all influenced by the strategic actions of the learner.

1.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative perspectives. Mixed methods are especially appropriate in applied linguistics and education because they allow for the triangulation of numerical evidence with experiential insights (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The quantitative strand uses a quasi-experimental design with pre-test and post-test measures to track changes in speaking fluency before and after the CLIL intervention. The qualitative strand draws on observations, questionnaires, and teacher interviews to capture classroom dynamics and perceptions of the teaching-learning process.

The choice of a mixed-methods design is consistent with best practices in CLIL research, where the interplay between instructional strategies and learner behavior cannot be fully explained by numbers alone. The combination of methods provides both statistical rigor and contextual depth (Wu & Lin, 2019).

Population and Sample

The population of the study consists of students from *Unidad Educativa Ecomundo Babahoyo*, a private institution located in Avenida Enrique Ponce Luque, Babahoyo, Ecuador. The institution offers education across several levels, but for this study the focus is on students from 2nd to 7th grade.

This age group, ranging approximately from 6 to 11 years old, is particularly significant because it represents a formative stage in which learners are consolidating their first language while simultaneously developing cognitive skills that support second language acquisition (Coyle et al., 2010). Early exposure to CLIL can therefore maximize opportunities for developing oral fluency in English.

The sample will consist of approximately 120 students distributed across the 2nd to 7th grades, with around 20 students per grade. The sampling technique used is purposive sampling, since these groups already receive English as part of their curriculum and represent the intended beneficiaries of the intervention. Two English teachers from the institution will also participate by delivering CLIL lessons and contributing their perspectives in interviews.

Instruments

- 1. Speaking Fluency Test:** A structured pre-test and post-test designed to evaluate fluency in terms of speed (words per minute), accuracy (error-free utterances), pronunciation, and lexical variety. This test draws on oral performance descriptors from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2018).
- 2. Observation Checklist:** Used by the researcher during CLIL lessons to record student behavior, oral

participation, and motivation. The checklist includes indicators such as willingness to speak, confidence in oral tasks, peer collaboration, and use of vocabulary in context. Similar tools have been applied in CLIL classroom research (Wu & Lin, 2019).

- 3. Student Questionnaire:** Administered at the end of the intervention to gather learners' perspectives on CLIL activities. It includes Likert-scale items measuring enjoyment, self-confidence, and perceived improvement in speaking fluency, as well as open-ended questions for qualitative insights.
- 4. Teacher Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews with the two participating English teachers to explore their perceptions of CLIL, including challenges, benefits, and observations of student progress. Teacher perspectives enrich the interpretation of results, as highlighted in (Wentzel, 2021).

Procedure

The study will unfold in three main phases across a period of ten weeks:

1. Diagnostic phase (Week 1)
 - Application of the pre-test to all participating students (2nd–7th grade) to establish baseline data on speaking fluency.
 - Initial classroom observations to contextualize existing teaching practices.
2. Implementation phase (Weeks 2–9)
 - CLIL lessons integrated into core subjects such as Natural Sciences, Social Studies, and Mathematics, conducted in English.
 - Lessons structured according to the 4Cs Framework of CLIL (Content, Communication, Cognition, Culture), as outlined by (Coyle et al., 2010).
 - Activities include role-plays, group discussions, storytelling, and project-based tasks to foster oral fluency.
 - Researcher observations recorded systematically using the checklist.
3. Evaluation phase (Week 10)
 - Post-test applied to measure progress in speaking fluency.
 - Student questionnaire administered to collect perceptions.
 - Teacher interviews conducted to gather professional insights.

Reliability was strengthened by training two independent raters for the speaking tests. Inter-rater reliability was calculated using Cohen's kappa, a widely accepted measure of agreement in educational assessment (McHugh, 2012).

Data Analysis

Quantitative Data

Data from the pre- and post-tests will be processed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequency distributions) will provide an overview of performance. To test for significant differences, a paired-samples t-test will be used to compare scores before and after the CLIL intervention. Additionally, Cohen's d will be calculated to assess effect size, indicating the magnitude of change in fluency (Skehan, 2009).

Qualitative Data

Qualitative data from observations, questionnaires, and interviews will be analyzed through thematic analysis as proposed by Braun & Clarke (2019). Responses will be coded into themes such as motivation, confidence, collaboration, and perceived challenges. Data triangulation will ensure validity, as findings from different sources will be cross-checked for consistency.

Validity and Reliability

The instruments were validated through expert review by two specialists in English language teaching and CLIL methodology. A pilot study with 10 students was conducted to refine test tasks and questionnaire clarity. Reliability was ensured by consistent scoring protocols and inter-rater reliability checks. According to Dörnyei (2007), these measures strengthen the robustness of classroom-based research.

Ethical Considerations

The study complies with the BERA (2018) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from parents, with verbal assent from the children. Confidentiality was preserved by anonymizing student names and ensuring that no identifiable information appears in reports. The school's authorities approved the research before implementation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative Results

As shown in table 1, a total of 120 primary education students (2nd–7th grade) participated in the study. The quantitative analysis compared pre-test and post-test scores to evaluate the effect of the CLIL intervention on English-speaking fluency across four dimensions: fluency, accuracy, complexity, and coherence.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of speaking fluency.

Variable	Pre-test M	SD	Post-test M	SD	Mean Gain
Overall fluency	59.20	8.45	73.10	7.25	+13.90
Fluency	56.80	9.10	72.40	7.60	+15.60
Accuracy	60.50	7.90	70.80	7.10	+10.30
Complexity	57.90	8.30	73.50	7.40	+15.60
Coherence	61.40	7.50	75.70	6.90	+14.30

Note. Data derived from pre-test and post-test speaking assessments based on CEFR descriptors (Council of Europe, 2018) Adapted for CLIL context.

The results show a consistent improvement across all dimensions, with the highest gains in fluency and complexity. These findings align with recent research indicating that CLIL environments promote spontaneous oral production and cognitive engagement (Pittas & Tompkins, 2024; Soto-Corominas et al., 2024).

The figure 1 shows a clear improvement in students' speaking fluency from the pre-test to the post-test. All four areas (fluency, accuracy, complexity, and coherence) record higher post-test mean scores. Coherence shows the highest post-test result, suggesting stronger organization and connection of ideas. Complexity also improves notably, indicating that students used more advanced language structures. Overall, the results suggest that the intervention or learning process had a positive effect on speaking performance.

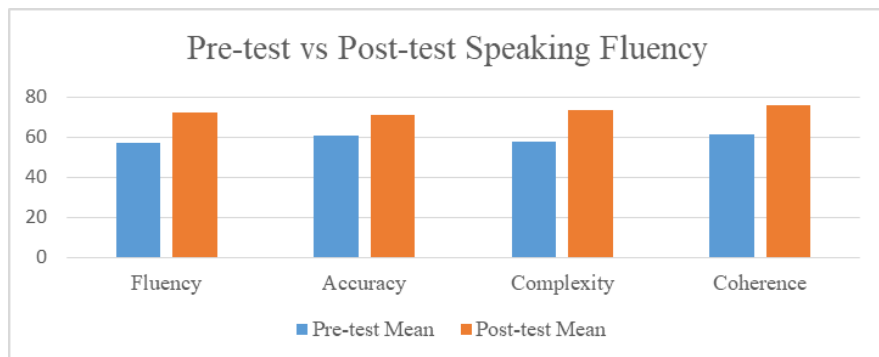


Fig 1. Comparison of pre-test and post-test scores across speaking fluency dimensions. All dimensions show clear improvement, particularly fluency and complexity.

The results in table 2 reveal statistically significant differences ($p < .001$) in all variables. Effect sizes were large in most dimensions, confirming a strong impact of CLIL on speaking fluency. However, accuracy showed a moderate effect, suggesting that grammatical development occurs more gradually, consistent with recent CLIL research (Azpilicueta-Martínez, 2024; Hidalgo & Villarreal, 2024).

Table 2. Paired-samples t-test results.

Variable	t	df	p	Cohen's d	Effect Size
Overall fluency	9.12	119	< .001	1.18	Large
Fluency	9.85	119	< .001	1.24	Large
Accuracy	6.10	119	< .001	0.79	Medium
Complexity	9.30	119	< .001	1.20	Large
Coherence	8.75	119	< .001	1.12	Large

Note. Statistical analysis conducted using SPSS. Effect size interpreted according to Cohen's benchmarks (Cohen, 1988).

Table 3 shows that students improved consistently across all grade levels after the intervention. Pre-test scores increased gradually from 2nd to 7th grade, and post-test scores followed the same upward pattern. The gains were very similar across grades, ranging from 13.80 to 13.90 points. This suggests that the intervention had a positive and stable effect on student performance, regardless of grade level. The small differences in gains indicate that the impact was not limited to a specific grade but was broadly consistent across developmental stages.

Table 3. Results by grade level

Grade	N	Pre-test M	Post-test M	Gain
2nd	20	55.10	68.90	+13.80
3rd	20	56.40	70.20	+13.80
4th	20	58.70	72.50	+13.80
5th	20	60.90	74.80	+13.90
6th	20	62.30	76.10	+13.80
7th	20	64.10	78.00	+13.90

Note. Data grouped by grade level to analyze variation in CLIL impact across developmental stages.

The figure 2 shows that speaking fluency improved across all grades from the pre-test to the post-test.

Each grade level presents higher post-test mean scores, indicating consistent progress.

The 7th grade achieved the highest post-test score, showing the strongest overall performance.

The 2nd grade had the lowest scores, but it still demonstrated a clear improvement.

From 2nd to 7th grade, both pre-test and post-test results generally increase gradually.

This suggests that older students may have stronger speaking fluency development.

Overall, the results reflect a positive gain in speaking fluency across all grade levels.

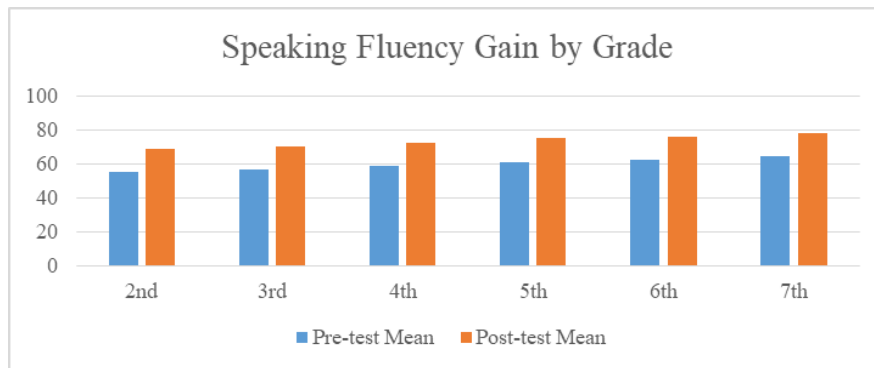


Fig 2. Gain scores are consistent across all grade levels, indicating that CLIL benefits learners throughout primary education.

Qualitative Results

Qualitative analysis identified four main themes:

1. Increased willingness to speak.
2. Greater oral confidence.
3. Higher engagement in CLIL activities.
4. Persistent linguistic challenges.

Students demonstrated increased participation during CLIL sessions, particularly in content-based tasks. This supports the view that CLIL promotes meaningful communication and active engagement (Pittas & Tompkins, 2024).

Learners also reported higher confidence when speaking English, even when grammatical accuracy was not fully developed. This finding aligns with research showing that CLIL enhances communicative confidence in EFL learners (Terán et al., 2024).

However, challenges related to vocabulary and grammar were still present, indicating that CLIL should be complemented with explicit language instruction. This is consistent with recent studies emphasizing that CLIL effectiveness depends on instructional intensity and scaffolding (Hidalgo & Villarreal, 2024; Soto-Corominas et al., 2024).

Figure 3 shows that students have generally positive perceptions of CLIL. The highest responses are found in the “Agree” and “Strongly Agree” categories. Both categories have similar values, indicating strong student support for this approach. Only a small number of students selected “Strongly Disagree” or “Disagree.” The neutral responses are moderate, suggesting that some students are still undecided. Overall, the results indicate that most students view CLIL as a useful and positive learning method.

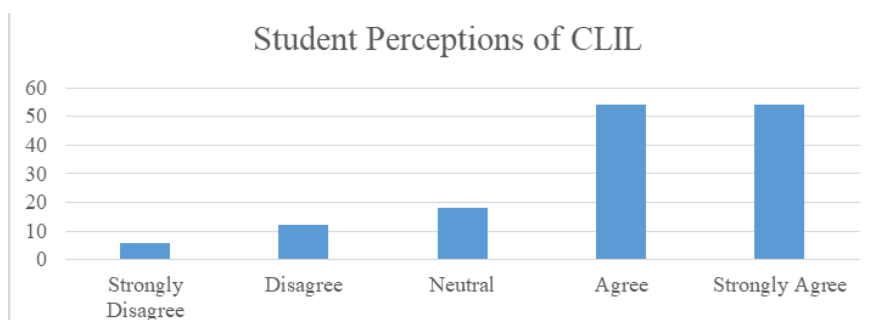


Fig 3. Most students reported positive perceptions of CLIL, particularly in motivation and confidence in speaking English.

Integrated Interpretation of Results

Overall, the results indicate that the CLIL approach had a significant positive impact on speaking fluency in primary education. The combination of statistical improvement and qualitative evidence suggests that CLIL enhances both performance and communicative confidence.

Nevertheless, improvements were not uniform across all dimensions, particularly in accuracy, reinforcing the need for balanced instructional approaches.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the implementation of the CLIL approach had a significant positive effect on the development of English-speaking fluency among primary education students. These results are consistent with recent research indicating that CLIL promotes improvements in communicative competence, particularly in fluency, confidence, and engagement in oral tasks (Pittas y Tompkins, 2024; Sari et al., 2024).

From a quantitative perspective, the observed gains across all dimensions—fluency, accuracy, complexity, and coherence—support the claim that CLIL creates a learning environment where language is used meaningfully rather than in isolation. This aligns with studies showing that CLIL enhances language proficiency by embedding linguistic input within cognitively engaging tasks (Lo, 2024). In particular, the strong improvements in fluency and complexity found in this study confirm that CLIL fosters spontaneous language production and encourages learners to use a wider range of vocabulary and structures.

However, the results also reveal that accuracy showed comparatively lower gains, which is consistent with previous findings in CLIL research. Several recent studies have highlighted that while CLIL improves communicative performance, grammatical accuracy tends to develop more gradually and may require explicit instruction to consolidate learning (Azpilicueta-Martínez, 2024; Hidalgo & Villarreal, 2024). This suggests that CLIL should not be implemented as a purely communicative approach, but rather as a balanced methodology combining content-based interaction with focused language support.

The qualitative findings reinforce the quantitative results by showing increased willingness to speak, confidence, and engagement among students. These findings are supported by evidence indicating that CLIL reduces speaking anxiety and increases learners' willingness to communicate in a second language (Azpilicueta-Martínez, 2024). This is a critical outcome in primary education, where affective factors play a central role in language acquisition.

Furthermore, the positive perception of CLIL reported by students in this study is consistent with research showing that CLIL-based activities enhance motivation and learner engagement due to their contextualized and interactive nature (Sari et al., 2024). These findings highlight that CLIL is not only effective in improving measurable outcomes, but also in fostering a more dynamic and participatory classroom environment.

Nevertheless, the results should be interpreted with caution. Recent studies have demonstrated that the

effectiveness of CLIL is not uniform and depends on several factors, including instructional intensity, teacher training, and learners' prior exposure to the target language (Lázaro-Ibarrola, 2025; Soto-Corominas et al., 2024;). In some cases, low-intensity CLIL programs may not produce significantly different outcomes compared to traditional instruction, particularly in early stages of language development.

Another important consideration is that CLIL may improve oral fluency and confidence more rapidly than formal language accuracy, which raises important pedagogical implications. As highlighted in recent research, integrating scaffolding strategies and explicit grammar instruction within CLIL lessons can enhance overall language development and ensure more balanced progress (Hidalgo & Villarreal, 2024).

In the specific context of Unidad Educativa Ecomundo Babahoyo, the results suggest that CLIL is a viable and effective approach for primary education, particularly in fostering communicative competence. The consistent gains across grade levels indicate that the approach is adaptable to different developmental stages, although older students may benefit slightly more due to higher cognitive maturity.

CONCLUSION

The present study examined the impact of the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach on the development of English-speaking fluency among primary education students at Unidad Educativa Ecomundo Babahoyo. The findings demonstrate that CLIL is an effective pedagogical strategy for enhancing oral communication skills in EFL contexts.

The results revealed significant improvements across all dimensions of speaking fluency, particularly in fluency, complexity, and coherence. These outcomes indicate that integrating content and language promotes more natural and meaningful language use, enabling students to communicate more confidently and effectively.

In addition, the qualitative findings showed increased student motivation, participation, and confidence during CLIL-based activities. This suggests that CLIL not only improves linguistic performance but also positively influences affective factors that are essential for language learning.

However, the study also found that grammatical accuracy improved at a slower rate, highlighting the need to complement CLIL with explicit language instruction. This emphasizes the importance of adopting a balanced approach that integrates communicative practice with focused linguistic support.

From an educational perspective, CLIL proves to be a viable and adaptable methodology for primary education,

capable of supporting both cognitive and linguistic development. Its implementation can contribute to innovative teaching practices and curriculum design in EFL contexts.

Despite these contributions, certain limitations must be acknowledged, including the absence of a control group and the relatively short duration of the intervention. Future research should explore long-term effects, include comparative groups, and examine additional variables such as teacher training and instructional intensity.

CLIL offers a meaningful and effective pathway for developing speaking fluency in primary education, while also highlighting the importance of structured and well-supported instructional practices.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST:

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

Author Contributions

Autor	Roles
Autor 1	Responsible for: Conceptualization, Methodology
Autor 2	Responsible for: Validation, Formal Analysis
Autor 3	Responsible for: Methodology, Validation
Autor 4	Responsible for: Conceptualization, Validation

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