

Active Learning and CNNs for Reliable Detection of Fetal Intracranial Structures

Ana Carolina Morais¹, Fernanda Fernandes¹

¹Department of Informatics Engineering, University of Coimbra
{anamorais,mrfernandes}@student.dei.uc.pt

Abstract

Misdiagnosis is a concern, in the field of healthcare as it can have impacts on patient outcomes and delay treatment procedures significantly. This project is focused on improving decision making by creating an Active Learning system that supports healthcare providers in identifying intracranial structures between weeks 11 to 14 of gestation. By utilizing a dataset consisting of 1,528 ultrasound images with a view the model makes use of a neural network (CNN) classifier to precisely recognize nine vital anatomical features such, as thalamus, midbrain and nasal bone. By incorporating a learning framework, into the systems operations in a step by step manner and with human involvement required to enhance its performance gradually over time compared to conventional passive learning methods will reduce the amount of data needed for training purposes. The findings reveal that the suggested system does not uphold a level of accuracy but also simplifies the diagnostic procedure by offering immediate assistance, to medical professionals and potentially lessening the risks linked to delayed diagnoses. This study emphasizes the impact that AI can have on diagnoses and underscores the necessity of creating efficient machine learning models to improve patient care effectively.

Keywords: Active Learning, CNNs, Fetal Health, Intracranial Structures, Ultrasound Imaging, Neural Networks, Healthcare Diagnostics, Artificial Intelligence, Deep Learning, modAL

1 Introduction

Advanced diagnostics in fetal healthcare face significant challenges, as errors in prenatal ultrasound interpretation can lead to delayed treatments and adverse outcomes for both mother and fetus [Leiserowitz and Herding, 2020]. With technology playing an increasingly vital role in obstetrics, precise identification of fetal structures has become critical [Yousefpour Shahrivar *et al.*, 2023].

This study introduces an Active Learning system [Pinto *et al.*, 2022] to aid healthcare professionals in identifying in-

tracranial structures during the 11-to-14-week gestational period. Building on advances in ultrasound imaging and neural network-based systems, the framework leverages human expertise to efficiently use existing data and enhance diagnostic accuracy while addressing the challenges of large-scale neural network training [SciDev.Net, 2024].

Using a dataset of 1,528 ultrasound images, the system focuses on recognizing nine key anatomical features, such as the thalamus, midbrain, and nasal bone, which are critical for fetal development and improving prenatal care. By combining cutting-edge machine learning techniques with clinical expertise, the framework simplifies fetal structure identification, advancing the application of AI in healthcare diagnostics.

This paper’s remaining sections are organized as follows: Materials, Methods, Results, Discussion, and Conclusion. The dataset, the preprocessing steps, and the tool utilized will all be covered in section 3. We will outline the plan to construct the model we suggest in section 4. The section 5 will present the outcomes derived from our model, and Section 6 will assess the results’ level of significance. Section 7 will conclude with a summary of the work completed and some remarks.

2 Related Work

The application of artificial intelligence in medical diagnostics has grown significantly in recent years, demonstrating its potential to reduce diagnostic errors and improve patient outcomes. For example, [Jian *et al.*, 2021] proposes the use of multi scale feature concatenation networks and a simplified framework for detection and localization of myocardial infarction using ECG data, addressing challenges such as overfitting and underfitting, demonstrating improved performance compared to state of the art methods. [Safdar *et al.*, 2018] conducted a comprehensive review of machine learning based decision support systems for heart disease diagnosis, highlighting the effectiveness of various algorithms such as artificial neural networks and support vector machines in clinical applications, as always, noted the critical need for real time clinical data to enhance the training and accuracy of these systems in practical healthcare settings. These works emphasize the utility of machine learning in clinical settings, although they rely heavily on extensive labeled datasets, a

challenge that limits scalability in resource constrained environments.

Active Learning has emerged as a promising solution to reduce the need for large labeled datasets while maintaining high model accuracy.[Mahapatra *et al.*, 2019] proposes an innovative medical image super resolution method using progressive generative adversarial networks, highlighting the effectiveness of the approach in improving the segmentation of vascular structures and micro aneurysms in retinal background images, which complement advances in image processing techniques in the area of medical analysis [Zhang *et al.*, 2021] developed a system Deep learning based image classification specifically designed for detecting retinal lesions and skin abnormalities. Their approach not only reduced the labeling requirements by 35% through the implementation of advanced convolutional neural network techniques but also achieved an accuracy that is comparable to traditional diagnostic methods, highlighting the potential of artificial intelligence to enhance diagnostic efficiency and accuracy in ophthalmology and dermatology. These findings highlight the effectiveness of AL in medical imaging, making it a viable alternative to traditional learning frameworks.

Despite its success in various medical applications, the use of Active Learning in fetal imaging remains sparsely explored. Most studies in this domain rely on passive learning methods. [Garcia-Canadilla *et al.*, 2020] highlights the potential of machine learning in fetal cardiology, demonstrating how these technologies can optimize image acquisition and improve the diagnosis of cardiac anomalies in fetuses, which complement our research on the application of artificial intelligence techniques in assessing neonatal conditions. In the context of prenatal assessment, [Phung *et al.*, 2023] developed a convolution neural network model that uses a feature rearrangement approach to predict Down syndrome, achieving superior results in terms of precision and recall compared to traditional methods, which highlights the effectiveness of artificial intelligence in improving of prenatal diagnosis. The need for more data efficient techniques is evident, especially for tasks requiring precise identification of anatomical features, such as intracranial structures, during early gestation.

Very recently [Sun *et al.*, 2024] developed a new model to measure fetal intracranial markers during the trimester, demonstrating strong consistency and correlation with manual measurements. Their work established normal reference ranges for key intracranial markers and highlighted the potential of AI to streamline sonographer tasks, achieving a measurement time significantly faster than traditional methods.

3 Materials

Database

The dataset¹ for this project consists of 1528 2D sagittal-view ultrasound images collected from Shenzhen People’s Hospital. However, for training and validation purposes, we selected a curated subset of 810 images stored in the folder Set1-Training&Validation

¹<https://data.mendeley.com/datasets/n2rbrb9t4f/1>

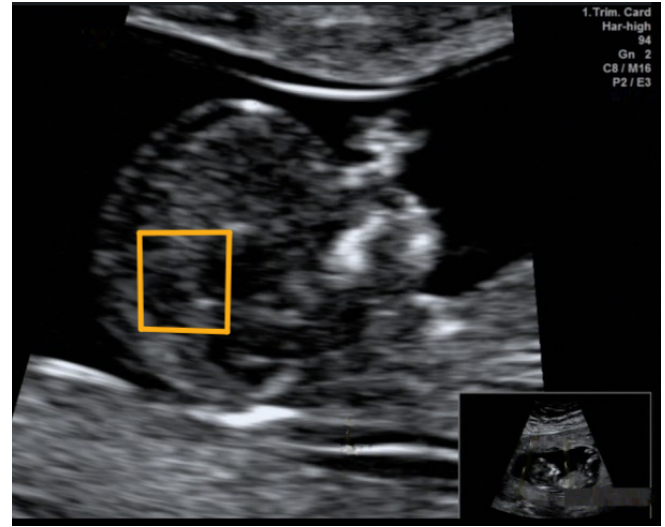


Figure 1: Example of a dataset image with the cutout

Sets CNN\Standard. This subset represents a standard plane classification set critical for our model’s initial development. Additionally, we leveraged images from the folder Set2-Training&Validation Sets ANN Scoring system\Standard, which, despite the folder name not specifically indicating CNN usage, were identified as relevant through the provided ObjectDetection.xlsx file. These annotations specify the bounding box coordinates ($h_{min}, w_{min}, h_{max}, w_{max}$) and the structure label for each image. During preprocessing, each image in the selected subsets is cropped using the corresponding bounding box, resized to 224×224 pixels, normalized to $[0, 1]$ scale, and rearranged to match the expected format $[C, H, W]$ required by the PyTorch deep learning framework.

To test the model performance, additional images from the folders Internal Test Set and External Test Set are used. These datasets provide a separate evaluation set to validate the robustness and generalization of the trained model.

4 Methodos

This section outlines the approach used to address the problem of accurately identifying intracranial fetal structures in ultrasound images. The proposed system integrates a Convolutional Neural Network (CNN) for feature extraction and classification with an Active Learning framework to iteratively improve model performance while reducing the labeling effort required by domain experts.

4.1 Preprocessing

The preprocessing phase is essential to prepare the ultrasound images before feeding them into the Convolutional Neural Network. The process includes several critical steps to ensure that the data is in the correct format and ready for training.

171	First, the images are loaded from the specified directory	229
172	and each image is cropped according to predefined coordi-	230
173	nates. These coordinates are retrieved from the metadata,	231
174	which indicates the region of interest (ROI) of the image.	
175	Cropping is necessary to focus the model's attention on the	
176	relevant structures in the image, such as the thalamus or mid-	
177	brain, while removing any unnecessary parts of the image.	
178	This step ensures that CNN can learn to identify only the most	
179	critical features.	
180	Next, each image is resized to a fixed dimension of	
181	224×224 pixels. This resizing is crucial because the model	
182	requires a consistent input size for all images to process them	
183	efficiently. Without resizing, the model would struggle to	
184	handle images of varying sizes, potentially leading to errors	
185	during training.	
186	After resizing, the images are normalized by scaling the	
187	pixel values to the range $[0, 1]$. This step is essential be-	
188	cause neural networks work better when input values are on	
189	a similar scale, which helps the optimization process and ac-	
190	celerates convergence during training. By dividing the pixel	
191	values by 255, we ensure that the images are scaled appropri-	
192	ately for the network.	
193	Following normalization, the channels of each image are	
194	reordered from the default [height, width, channels] format to	
195	[channels, height, width], as required by most CNN frame-	
196	works. This reordering is necessary because the network ex-	
197	pects input in a specific format, and changing the order en-	
198	sures that the model can correctly process the image.	
199	Finally, each image is assigned a label corresponding to	
200	the anatomical structure it contains. The labels are retrieved	
201	from the metadata and are used to train the model to classify	
202	the different structures in the fetal ultrasound images. Label	
203	assignment is a crucial step for supervised learning, as it pro-	
204	vides the model with the correct target for each input image.	
205	These preprocessing steps ensure that the dataset is	
206	properly formatted and ready for input into the CNN, en-	
207	abling efficient and accurate model training.	
208	4.2 Convolutional Neural Network (CNN)	
209	The Convolutional Neural Network (CNN) serves as the	
210	backbone of the model for identifying the fetal anatomical	
211	structures from ultrasound images [Sarvamangala and Kulka-	
212	rni, 2022]. CNNs are particularly effective in image classifi-	
213	cation tasks due to their ability to automatically learn hierar-	
214	chical features from data, such as edges, textures, and com-	
215	plex patterns.	
216	In our implementation, the CNN consists of several lay-	
217	ers of convolutional filters, each followed by ReLU activation	
218	functions to introduce non-linearity and enable the network	
219	to learn more complex representations. After each convolu-	
220	tional layer, a max-pooling operation is applied to reduce the	
221	spatial dimensions of the feature maps, making the network	
222	more computationally efficient while preserving essential in-	
223	formation. The model also includes dropout layers to pre-	
224	vent overfitting by randomly deactivating a fraction of neu-	
225	rons during training.	
226	The final part of the network consists of fully connected	
227	layers, which take the extracted features and map them to the	
228	target classes (nine fetal anatomical structures). The network	
	is trained using the cross-entropy loss function, and optimiza-	229
	tion is performed using the Adam optimizer, which adapts the	230
	learning rate based on the gradients during training.	231
	4.3 Active Learning	232
	Active Learning is an advanced machine learning	233
	paradigm that optimizes the model's learning process by se-	234
	lectively querying the most informative data points for label-	235
	ing. Instead of relying on a large, fully labeled dataset, Ac-	236
	tive Learning seeks to minimize the amount of labeled data	237
	required while maintaining or even improving performance.	238
	The framework used in this study is modAL, a Python-based	239
	library built on top of scikit-learn, which provides flexi-	240
	bility for creating customized Active Learning workflows.	241
	modAL allows the seamless integration of Active Learning	242
	strategies with existing models, making it ideal for applica-	243
	tions in medical image analysis where labeling can be time-	244
	consuming and costly. More information about Active Learn-	245
	ing in [Wang <i>et al.</i> , 2024].	246
	To implement Active Learning, we used modAL's Ac-	247
	tiveLearner class with a Convolutional Neural Network clas-	248
	sifier. The classifier was optimized using the Adam opti-	249
	mizer and trained with the CrossEntropyLoss function, suit-	250
	able for multi-class classification tasks. Several hyperparam-	251
	eters, such as the query strategy, number of epochs for both	252
	the learner and the Active Learning loop, and the number of	253
	instances and queries, were tuned through experimentation to	254
	achieve the best performance.	255
	Active Learning allows the model to select the most in-	256
	formative data points for training, which is particularly use-	257
	ful when there is limited labeled data. The system starts with	258
	a small labeled set and then queries the most uncertain in-	259
	stances from an unlabeled pool. These uncertain instances	260
	are considered the most valuable for improving the model's	261
	performance. In our implementation, two query strategies	262
	were tested: uncertainty sampling, where the model selects	263
	the most uncertain examples, and margin sampling, which fo-	264
	cuses on instances with the smallest margin between the two	265
	most probable class predictions. Once labeled by an expert,	266
	these instances are added to the training set, and the model	267
	is retrained, refining its predictions with fewer labeled exam-	268
	ples.	269
	4.4 Metrics	270
	As mentioned in earlier sections, a number of mea-	271
	sures will be used to assess the effectiveness of the suggested	272
	model, including accuracy, sensitivity, specificity, positive	273
	and negative predictive value, and the area under the Receiver	274
	Operating Characteristic Curve. These indicators are crucial	275
	for evaluating the model's performance, especially when it	276
	comes to medical diagnostics, where misclassification might	277
	have serious consequences.	278
	Accuracy The percentage of accurate forecasts both true	279
	positives and true negatives among all predictions is known	280
	as accuracy. It offers a broad indicator of the model's perfor-	281
	mance across all classes. However, because accuracy might	282
	be distorted by the dominant classes, it could not accurately	283

284 represent the model’s performance in imbalanced datasets.

$$\text{Accuracy} = \frac{TP + TN}{TP + TN + FP + FN}$$

285 **Sensitivity** Sensitivity, or Recall, also known as sensitiv-
286 ity, gauges how well the model can detect positive exam-
287 ples. Sensitivity is important in medical applications since
288 it shows how well the model can detect diseases or abnormal-
289 ities while reducing false negatives. Maximizing sensitivity
290 is crucial in healthcare since a missed or delayed diagnosis
291 could have serious repercussions.

$$\text{Sensitivity} = \frac{TP}{TP + FN}$$

292 **Specificity** Specificity, or the true negative rate, measures
293 the model’s ability to correctly identify negative instances. In
294 the medical context, specificity ensures that healthy individ-
295 uals are not incorrectly diagnosed, avoiding unnecessary and
296 potentially harmful treatments. While specificity may not be
297 as crucial as sensitivity in some situations, it still plays an
298 important role in preventing false positives.

$$\text{Specificity} = \frac{TN}{TN + FP}$$

299 **Area Under the ROC Curve** The AUC measures the
300 model’s ability to distinguish between classes across all
301 thresholds. It is particularly useful for evaluating models in
302 multi-class problems, as it provides an overall assessment of
303 performance. AUC values range from 0 to 1, with higher val-
304 ues indicating better discrimination between classes.

305 Since this is a multi-class problem with an imbalanced
306 dataset, the metrics will be calculated using micro-averaging.
307 Micro-averaging combines the contributions of all classes
308 to compute a single averaged performance value. This ap-
309 proach is particularly useful when classes are not equally rep-
310 resented, ensuring that the performance of all classes is taken
311 into account.

312 4.5 Experimental Setup

313 The experiments conducted in this study aimed to eval-
314 uate the performance of a Convolutional Neural Network
315 (CNN) model integrated with Active Learning techniques.
316 The goal was to assess how different configurations of the
317 model, including variations in hyperparameters and Active
318 Learning strategies, impact the model’s performance in clas-
319 sifying fetal anatomical structures from ultrasound images.

320 **Experimental Design** A series of experiments were de-
321 signed to evaluate the effect of different configurations on the
322 model’s performance. Each experiment involved varying key
323 parameters, such as the number of layers in the CNN, the
324 number of epochs for both the learner and Active Learning
325 loop, the query strategy used, and the number of instances to
326 be labeled during each iteration. The experiments were con-
327 ducted using two primary Active Learning strategies: *margin*
328 *sampling* and *uncertainty sampling*, with an additional test on
329 *entropy sampling*.

5 Results

331 Table 1 summarizes the key outcomes of our experi-
332 ments, including variations in model architecture, training
333 epochs, sampling strategies, and resulting accuracies. After
334 some test we decided to use a dropout rate of 0.6, a learn-
335 ing rate of 1e-4, and a weight decay of 1e-4 to mitigate the
336 risk of overfitting, stabilize the optimization process, and
337 enhance model generalization, particularly given the simple
338 single-layer architecture and the limited size of the dataset.
339 Among the tested configurations, ID 6 achieved the highest
340 test accuracy of 84.91%, demonstrating a strong balance be-
341 tween model simplicity and performance. This configuration
342 utilized a single-layer neural network trained for 40 epochs
343 within the learner and 20 epochs in the Active Learning loop,
344 employing uncertainty sampling as its sampling strategy.

345 Other notable configurations include ID 2 (test accuracy:
346 78.40%) and ID 10 (test accuracy: 79.56%), both of which
347 employed a two-layer neural network with comparable sam-
348 pling strategies but did not achieve the same level of gener-
349 alization as ID 6. Configurations with deeper architectures
350 (e.g., IDs 3 and 7) exhibited diminished performance, high-
351 lighting the risk of overfitting with excessive model complex-
352 ity and limited training instances.

353 Additionally, the results from experiments shown in Ta-
354 ble 2, further validate the findings from Table 1. Despite
355 adjustments to these hyperparameters to stabilize training
356 and reduce overfitting, the performance improvements were
357 marginal compared to the results from Table 1. This suggests
358 that the ID 6 configuration remains the most effective, even
359 with additional tuning.

360 Further validating the effectiveness of ID 6, Table 3
361 highlights diagnostic performance metrics across various
362 anatomical regions. Notably, the model demonstrated strong
363 overall reliability with micro-averaged Sensitivity and Speci-
364 ficity of 81.13% and 97.64%, respectively, and an overall ac-
365 curacy of 95.81%. These metrics confirm that ID 6 is not only
366 effective in generalizing across different structures, but also
367 robust in distinguishing positive and negative cases. Specific
368 highlights include:

369 The Cisterna Magna achieving an impressive accuracy
370 of 97.80%, supported by high Sensitivity (0.92) and Speci-
371 ficity (0.983). The Nuchal Translucency (NT) achieving an
372 accuracy of 98.43%, reflecting its ability to reliably detect this
373 feature while minimizing false positives and negatives. Near-
374 perfect performance in regions like the Nasal Tip (97.48% ac-
375 curacy) and Nasal Bone (96.85% accuracy), indicating strong
376 adaptability of ID 6 for features with diverse challenges. The
377 Palate, while achieving perfect Specificity and PPV, had a
378 lower Sensitivity (0.537), highlighting opportunities to en-
379 hance the model’s recall for certain conditions.

380 As shown in Figure 2, the incremental classification ac-
381 curacy improves steadily with each query iteration, reflecting
382 the benefits of uncertainty sampling in active learning. The
383 training accuracy converges slightly faster than test accuracy,
384 suggesting effective learning from queried instances without
385 overfitting. This trend further validates the robustness of the
386 ID 6 configuration across the active learning process.

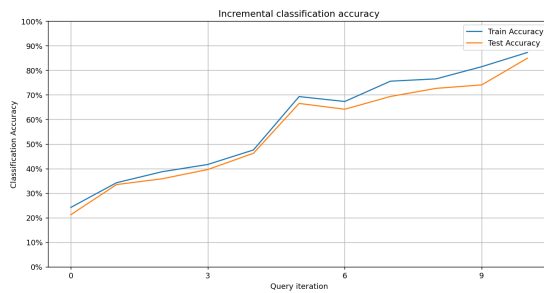


Figure 2: Incremental classification accuracy over query iterations.

6 Discussion

The superior performance of ID 6 can be attributed to its optimal trade-off between architectural simplicity, training epochs, and sampling strategy. Specifically: The single-layer network in ID 6 minimized the risk of overfitting, which was evident in deeper models (e.g., IDs 3 and 7). Simpler architectures proved effective for the relatively small dataset used in our study, avoiding unnecessary complexity that could lead to poor generalization. The choice of 40 epochs for the learner and 20 epochs in the AL loop ensured sufficient training without overextending the process. Configurations with fewer epochs (e.g., IDs 3 and 11) struggled to generalize effectively, while those with excessive epochs (e.g., ID 4) displayed signs of overfitting. These findings indicate the importance of balancing training duration to optimize performance. The use of uncertainty sampling in ID 6 allowed the model to prioritize instances that maximized learning potential, reducing data redundancy. This strategy outperformed alternatives such as entropy sampling (e.g., IDs 1 and 4) and margin sampling (e.g., IDs 7 and 10), which demonstrated lower efficiencies in leveraging the training data. The experiments conducted with a learning rate of $1e-4$, dropout rate of 0.6, and weight decay of $1e-4$, were aimed at stabilizing the optimization process and reducing overfitting. These parameters ensure that the model remains robust during training. However, the limited impact on performance, as observed in Table 2, indicates that the architectural simplicity and sampling strategy in ID 6 were the key contributors to its success. While the experiments summarized in Table 2 explored configurations with modified training epochs and optimized hyperparameters, the results still support the conclusion that the ID 6 configuration from Table 1 was the most effective. This configuration balanced performance, efficiency, and practicality, making it a superior choice compared to configurations with more complex architectures or adjusted hyperparameters.

The high micro-averaged Sensitivity (81.13%) and Specificity (97.64%) reported in Table 3 underline the diagnostic strength of ID 6 across diverse anatomical regions. The near-perfect Specificity and Accuracy in detecting features like Cisterna Magna (97.80%) and Nuchal Translucency (98.43%) demonstrate its reliability. However, the lower Sensitivity for conditions like the Palate (53.66%) indicates areas for future improvement.

The combination of dropout and weight decay in the ex-

periments aimed to regulate the model’s capacity to memorize the data. These techniques are known to improve generalization by mitigating overfitting, especially when datasets are small. However, the marginal improvement observed in Table 2 suggests that the structural simplicity of ID 6 already aligned well with the dataset characteristics, reducing the need for aggressive regularization techniques.

Despite extensive experimentation with various configurations and hyperparameter optimizations, the ID 6 setup from Table 1 consistently outperformed others. Its simplicity, balanced training strategy, and effective sampling approach made it the best choice for the task. The findings from Table 3 further reinforce its effectiveness in a practical diagnostic context. Future studies should investigate the scalability of this configuration to larger datasets and explore whether additional hyperparameter tuning could further enhance its performance.

7 Conclusion

This study demonstrated the potential of integrating Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) with an Active Learning framework to address the challenge of identifying fetal intracranial structures in ultrasound images. By utilizing Active Learning, the system was able to incrementally refine its performance while minimizing the labeling effort, offering a practical solution in scenarios where annotated data is scarce.

Despite the promising results, several limitations were observed. The relatively small size of the dataset constrained the model’s capacity to generalize, leading to suboptimal sensitivity and specificity in some cases. Additionally, the model’s reliance on a limited number of training samples increased the risk of overfitting, particularly in a complex domain such as fetal anatomy. These challenges underscore the need for larger and more diverse datasets to improve the model’s robustness and reliability.

Future work should focus on addressing these limitations by exploring more sophisticated techniques, such as data augmentation and semi-supervised learning, to enhance the dataset’s diversity and reduce the dependency on labeled data. Furthermore, integrating additional medical imaging modalities and domain-specific knowledge could further improve the system’s diagnostic accuracy. Ultimately, this study highlights the importance of leveraging machine learning in medical diagnostics and provides a foundation for developing more efficient and reliable systems to support healthcare professionals.

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ID	Layers	Epochs (Learner)	Epochs (AL Loop)	Sampling Strategy	Instances to train	Queries	Train Accuracy	Test Accuracy
1	2	40	30	entropy_sampling	15	10	84.57%	72.84%
2	2	40	20	uncertainty_sampling	15	10	87.19%	78.40%
3	3	20	5	entropy_sampling	15	10	64.51%	59.88%
4	2	30	40	entropy_sampling	20	10	80.86%	74.07%
5	2	30	10	uncertainty_sampling	10	10	79.32%	72.84%
6	1	40	20	uncertainty_sampling	15	10	87.25%	84.91%
7	3	40	20	margin_sampling	15	10	77.93%	72.84%
8	2	25	5	margin_sampling	5	15	60.49%	56.17%
9	2	20	5	margin_sampling	15	10	79.01%	75.31%
10	2	40	20	margin_sampling	15	10	82.59%	79.56%
11	1	20	5	entropy_sampling	15	10	76.70%	73.46%

Table 1: Table of the best results.

ID	Epochs (Learner)	Epochs (AL Loop)	Train Accuracy	Test Accuracy
1	50	30	87.45%	81.76%
2	50	20	87.45%	78.93%
3	40	30	89.51%	79.63%
4	30	30	89.34%	83.33%
5	30	40	89.07%	83.96%

Table 2: Table of the best combinations taking into account the best combination from the previous table.

Structure	Sensitivity	Specificity	Positive Predictive Value	Negative Predictive Value	Accuracy
Thalami	0.761905	0.913043	0.571429	0.961832	0.893082
Midbrain	0.772727	0.956204	0.73913	0.963235	0.930818
Palate	0.536585	1	1	0.935811	0.940252
4th Ventricle	0.64	0.979522	0.727273	0.969595	0.95283
Cisterna Magna	0.92	0.982935	0.821429	0.993103	0.977987
Nuchal Translucency	0.875	0.993197	0.913043	0.989831	0.984277
Nasal Tip	0.90566	0.988679	0.941176	0.981273	0.974843
Nasal Skin	1	1	1	1	1
Nasal Bone	0.947368	0.971429	0.818182	0.992701	0.968553
Micro-Averaging Measurements	0.811321	0.976415	0.811321	0.976415	0.958071

Table 3: Table of experiment 6 results