Score Me if You Can:

Study on Robustness of Automated Essay Scoring Systems to Out-of-domain and Adversarial Inputs

Vinit Hegiste

Soumya Ranjan Sahoo

s8vihegi@stud.uni-saarland.de

s8sosaho@stud.uni-saarland.de

Vladislav Skripniuk

s8vlskri@stud.uni-saarland.de

Abstract

Successes in natural language processing gave rise to numerous automated essay scoring systems, some of which are now used in high-stakes tests. In this project we take one of the recent models [20] into consideration and through several sanity checks reveal some of its intriguing properties.

1. Introduction

The process of evaluating students' writing is time-consuming and repetitive, thus it is appealing to shift this duty from lecturers and tutors to automatic essays assessors. Numerous systems were designed [13] [15] [20] [1] [4] [5] [22] and some of them are used in high-stakes tests [3]. It is therefore important to verify validity of grades assigned by such systems and make sure, that they are resistant to possible fraudulent actions. In this project we take one of the recent models [20] into consideration and through several sanity checks reveal some of its intriguing properties. In section 2 we make an overview of existing work on automated essay scoring, adversarial examples in text domain in general and for the task of automated essay scoring in particular. In section

2. Related Work

The first AES system dates back to 1960s [13] when Project Essay Grade (PEG) was developed. Since then several systems were commercialized, one example is e-rater system [3], which is now used in Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and Graduate Record Examination (GRE). Models like SVR were shown to assign reasonable marks based on handcrafted features ¹ [15], while more re-

cent work also leveraged neural models, like LSTM [20] [1], CNN [4] and more bizarre architectures [5] [22] for this task.

Involvement of AES systems into exam evaluation process raises an issue of accountability and validity of assigned marks. [16] tested earlier versions of e-rater system by revealing the inner structure of the system to experts and asking them to trick the system into assigning higher scores to their texts. [21] created a dataset of 30 adversarial essays for their SVM model. [7] show, that model of [20] can not distinguish random permutations of sentence from actual essays and introduce Local Coherence model to address this issue.

Generation of adversarial examples in text domain for tasks other than automated essay scoring attracted significant attention in the past years. [8] show possibility of circumventing Google's Perspective API by intentionally introducing typos. [17] attribute words to certain gender and substitute them to prevent classifier from inferring gender of the writer. [19] manipulate performance of sentiment analysis and gender detection systems with help of hand-crafted rules to substitute words in texts. [14] [6] use graph unfolding for RNNs and find corrections closest to gradient descent step in embedding space. [10] append adversarial sentences to paragraphs to confuse question answering system. [18] achieve the same goal by introducing semantic preserving changes to questions. [2] and [12] construct semantically close adversarial examples for the tasks of sentiment analysis and textual entailment. [9] construct adversarial examples with specified syntax with paraphrase networks trained with back-translation.

¹https://github.com/edx/ease

3. Experiments

3.1. Data

The Automated Student Assessment Prize ² was organized to facilitate research in the field of automated essays scoring. The dataset contains essays, written in response to one of 8 prompts by students in grades from 7 to 10. Each essay set was evaluated by human annotators using its own grading scale. Most existing models solve this task as a supervised learning task, by predicting mark rescaled to range from 0 to 1. To evaluate models predictions marks are scaled back to their original grading scale and Quadratic weighted Kappa score is applied:

$$\kappa = 1 - \frac{\sum_{i,j} W_{i,j} O_{i,j}}{\sum_{i,j} W_{i,j} E_{i,j}}$$

where $O_{i,j}$ is a number of essays, which received score i from human annotator and score j from model. $E_{i,j}$ is an element from an outer product of two histograms for scores assigned to essays by human annotator and model (meaning an expected number of essays receiving score i and j from annotator and model respectively, if the model and annotator were totally uncorrelated, though marginal distribution of scores assigned by each of them was unchanged). Weights W_{ij} are computed as follows:

$$W_{ij} = \frac{(i-j)^2}{(N-1)^2}$$

where N is the maximal possible grade. This metric measures agreement in ratings, provided by two annotators with values ranging from -1 to 1, where 1 means perfect agreement, 0 that two rankings are unrelated, and -1 mean ratings of one annotator reverse the order induced by rankings of the other.

3.2. Model

For datasets from the field of computer vision pretrained models are usually made publicly available on the Internet ³ by authors or enthusiasts. However, for the task of automated essay scoring we were not able to find pretrained models, so the first step was to reproduce results of existing work. We decided to train LSTM model from [20]. To that end, we used code from two public repositories as reference implementations. ⁴ ⁵

In the light of space limitations, we do not thoroughly describe model architecture and implementation details, we refer interested reader to [20] and our repository ⁶. The model consists of LSTM cell, followed by a dropout layer,

mean over time pooling layer and fully connected layer, which outputs predicted score on a scale from 0 to 1. The model is trained as a regressor using MSE objective.

3.3. Data preprocessing

During preprocessing phase we've used NLTK tokenizer to split essays into tokens and GloVe vectors to embed discrete tokens into \mathbb{R}^{300} . However, we noticed, that nonnegligible share of all tokens can not be found in GloVe vectors dictionary. Inspection of several essays revealed existence of numerous spelling mistakes in some of them.

Extract from an essay without typos: Everyone laughs differently, some people laugh so hard that they cry, and some don't. But one thing that they have in common is laughter.

Extract from an essay with plenty of typos: they will tall you wat the other peolepa are saind obut you and the other per. i haved a good frand and that trust me. trust is a good thik if you dont have aing trust you are noting.

In ASAP-AES dataset description it is written, that students wrote these essays under strict time limitations and were not allowed any time for rereading or error correction, so possible misspellings were not taken into account during evaluation.

In table 1 we show proportion of unrecognized words in texts of all essays and in a vocabulary of all unique tokens, found in these essays. High percentage of unrecognized tokens in vocabulary is explained by Anna Karenina principle: there is only one way to be normal, while there are so many options to deviate from norm.

So, we decided to test two options: one is to substitute all out-of-vocabulary tokens with 'UNKNOWN' tag, another is to try to correct typos in all unknown words. To correct possible spelling mistake in unrecognized word we first found all closest words with edit distance not greater than 2, making typo in which could possibly result in this unrecognizable token. To choose one option out of pool of candidates we assigned each correction a probabilty of occurence, based on frequencies of all words in the dataset. We than picked substitution with highest probabilty. Another option to score candidate corrections based on context would be using Google Language Model [11], though we didn't invest much time into it, because subjective examination showed, that improper substitutions result from poor choice of candidate pool, not from poor scoring of candidates.

Using this approach we were able to substitute more than 99% of all unknown tokens by some known words, resulting in a dictionary of more than 10k substitutions. We provide first 20 consecutive entries from this dictionary below:

'somebad' \rightarrow 'somebady', 'presentid' \rightarrow 'presented', 'eithy' \rightarrow 'eith', 'sorryndings' \rightarrow 'surrondings', 'our-

²https://www.kaggle.com/c/asap-aes

³https://github.com/tensorflow/models/tree/master/research/slim

⁴https://github.com/nusnlp/nea

⁵https://github.com/zlliang/essaysense

⁶https://github.com/skripniuk/MLCySec

Essay set	Bet	fore	After			
	All	Unique	All	Unique		
1	0.0048	0.1897	0.0002	0.0088		
2	0.0050	0.1747	0.0001	0.0057		
3	0.0069	0.1547	0.0016	0.0092		
4	0.0055	0.1286	0.0002	0.0075		
5	0.0040	0.1498	0.0002	0.0090		
6	0.0040	0.1153	0.0001	0.0034		
7	0.0066	0.1590	0.0003	0.0082		
8	0.0012	0.0369	0.0001	0.0048		

Table 1. Proportion of unknown tokens before and after correcting typos

Essay set	Before	After
1	0.7694 ± 0.0217	0.7702 ± 0.0383
2	0.5651 ± 0.0256	0.5808 ± 0.0316
3	0.6544 ± 0.0091	0.64567 ± 0.0150
4	0.6465 ± 0.0148	0.6404 ± 0.0195
5	0.7572 ± 0.0262	0.7588 ± 0.0233
6	0.7184 ± 0.0281	0.7160 ± 0.0238
7	0.6225 ± 0.0312	0.6232 ± 0.0295
8	0.4247 ± 0.0426	0.4338 ± 0.0525
Avg. QWK	0.6448 ± 0.0137	0.6461 ± 0.0131

Table 2. QWK scores before and after correcting typos

tose' — 'purpose', 'colifornia' — 'california', 'resifes' — 'resipes', 'ceetain' — 'certain', 'edicational' — 'educational', 'documentories' — 'documentaries', 'continuence' — 'continuance', 'torirs' — 'toris', 'microcam' — 'microcar', "doens't" — "doesn't", 'steair' — 'stair', 'discuraged' — 'discouraged', 'characterice' — 'characterics', 'unasul' — 'unusual', 'stratend' — 'strated'

It can be seen, that some typos were fixed correctly, while some other substitutions are questionable. We than trained LSTM model on the original and corrected datasets using k-fold cross validation for evaluation. It can be seen in table 2, that essays with corrected typos are scored more accurately, though improvement is negligible. This result is a bit confusing, because during initial phase of the project, when we used only one fold and one essay set, we observed substantial improvement in QWK, which turned out to be non-significant when evaluated more properly. We also could not observe any differences in learning curves on figure 1, so we decided not to use typo corrections in later sections to retain compatibility with previous work.

3.4. Prompt specific models

The ASAP-AES is divided into 8 essay sets, essays from each essay set correponding to one of 8 prompts. Though

each essay set is relatively small, on average consisting of 1.5k samples, we trained 8 LSTM models, one for each essay set. We report QWK scores on validation set in table 3.4. We achieved QWK values close to those of the authors, who also used a separate model for each essay set. These results show, that model trained on all essay sets does not profit from increased sample size, while separate models are doing quite well by learning prompt specific features. That raises a question of domain adaptation for Automated Essay Scoring Systems, which was discussed in [15].

3.5. Robustness on out-of-domain data

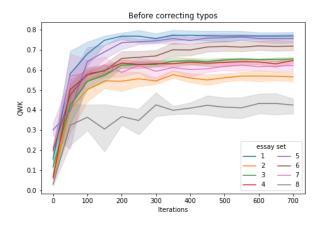
To investigate on existence of inputs, which may lead the model to produce unexpected predictions, we performed the following sanity check. We used the model to evaluate essay, consisting of multiple repetitions of one word. We executed this check for every word in a dictionary. Distribution of scores given by models on each of 8 essays sets if shown in Appendix.

Surprisingly, the marks spread over the whole range of possible grades, with significant number of essays receiving highest possible marks. At this point, it would be interesting to compare these distributions with confusion matrices computed on validation set of regular essays. For normal essays predicted score differs from the one provided by human rater by more than 1 point in very rare cases. Also distribution of scores for normal essays is much more concentrated in the middle, giving only a small share of students excellent marks. In contrary, distribution of scores on one-word essays is flat in the middle, with salient peaks at opposite ends of the range.

Indisputably, existence of such inputs limits applicability of this model in real-world scenarios. The form of aforementioned distribution of scores for adversarial essays makes us hypothesize, that learned models do not look for long term features like persuasive reasoning or coherent narrative, but are rather being triggered by certain words, which are divided into two big groups of those having positive and negative influence on the overall mark.

3.6. Adversarially perturbed essays

To investigate on existence of semantics preserving adversarial examples we have adopted method of [2]. This method substitutes words with their synonims, making use of genetic algorithm to select a set of best substitutions. Using this method we were able to achieve only a marginal improvement in scores. Some "successful" attacks can be found in Appendix. The reason behind this bad luck may be as follows. The method of [2] generates successful attacks for tasks of sentiment analisys or textual entailment because in these tasks model has to pay attention to details, because even single word "not" may change the meaning of the whole review by 180 degrees. Therefore, change of



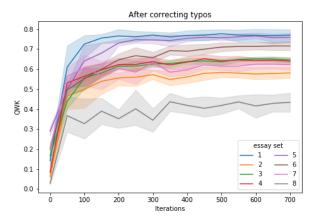


Figure 1. QWK of LSTM model on validation set

Method				Avg. QWK					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
LSTM (our implementation)	0.769	0.565	0.654	0.646	0.757	0.718	0.623	0.425	0.645
8 LSTMs (our implementation)	0.815	0.689	0.635	0.801	0.801	0.828	0.761	0.668	0.750
LSTM (Taghipour & Ng)	0.775	0.687	0.683	0.795	0.818	0.813	0.805	0.594	0.746

Table 3. QWK scores on validation set. 8 LSTMs mean that a separate model is trained for each essay set.

single words significantly affects model output. In the task of automated essay scoring model can or can not pay attention to the details, reasoning about final mark based only on general style of the essay. Hence, single words contribute insignificantly to the overall mark, though it can be seen, that adversary is trying to drop fancy, pompous words here and there.

4. Conclusion

Conclusions, we make based on results of the experiments, are threefold:

- 1. Since performance of models trained separately on each essay set is significantly better than this of a model trained on all essays, we conclude, that task of essay evaluation is very prompt specific, i.e. model learns features specific for this topic and these feature do not transfer well between different topics.
- 2. The model we considered was easily triggered by oneword essays. That hints that rather than learning complex patterns, model makes it's predictions based on meaning of single words.
- 3. Essays are rather long texts compared to reviews or tweets, so the model does not concentrate on any particular words, making it difficult to manipulate predictions by changing words. In favor of this also speaks the fact, that correction of typos, which constituted a small share of all words in texts didn't influence performance of the model

much.

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Appendix

Confusion matrices

Here we provide confusion matrices on validation set for each of 8 LSTM models, one for each essay set.

Actual marks	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Predictions											
5	1	1	3	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
6	0	0	2	2	11	2	2	0	0	0	0
7	0	0	0	0	15	9	28	2	0	0	0
8	0	0	0	0	0	5	47	11	4	0	0
9	0	0	0	0	0	1	40	43	30	2	0
10	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	20	36	17	6
11	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	5	2	5

Figure 2. Essay set 1

Actual marks	0	1	2	3
Predictions				
1	29	364	89	9
2	1	104	391	120
3	1	13	47	213

Figure 4. Essay set 3

Actual marks	0	1	2	3	4
Predictions					
1	19	189	63	1	0
2	0	54	370	74	1
3	0	1	93	336	74
4	0	0	1	28	140

Figure 6. Essay set 5

Actual marks	0- 2	3- 5	6-8	9-11	12-14	15-17	18-20	21-23	24-26
Predictions									
6-8	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
9-11	1	6	60	49	34	6	0	0	0
12-14	0	2	19	68	113	83	12	0	0
15-17	0	0	1	12	54	174	109	13	1
18-20	0	0	0	0	9	77	89	53	16
21-23	0	0	0	0	2	8	34	52	35
24-26	0	0	0	0	0	1	8	29	21
27-29	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2

Figure 8. Essay set 7

Actual marks	1	2	3	4	5	6
Predictions						
2	17	76	19	0	0	0
3	1	49	445	143	0	0
4	0	2	140	479	35	1
5	0	0	0	10	20	3

Figure 3. Essay set 2

Actual marks	0	1	2	3	
Predictions					
0	140	50	0	0	
1	102	412	70	4	
2	2	39	322	36	
3	1	2	70	166	

Figure 5. Essay set 4

Actual marks	0	1	2	3	4
Predictions					
1	30	96	21	1	0
2	0	39	241	58	0
3	0	3	71	505	86
4	0	0	0	94	195

Figure 7. Essay set 6

Actual marks	6-11	12-17	18-23	24-29	30-35	36-41	42-47	48-53	54-59
Predictions									
18-23	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
24-29	0	1	2	16	12	1	0	0	0
30-35	0	0	1	15	102	29	2	0	0
36-41	0	0	0	0	75	193	51	2	0
42-47	0	0	0	0	4	25	29	13	0
48-53	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1

Figure 9. Essay set 8

Scores on one word essays

Here we provide confusion matrices on validation set for each of 8 LSTM models, one for each essay set.

Score	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
# of essays	0	10	995	1665	4241	1270	1375	1351	1226	990	1420	457

Table 4. Distribution of scores received by one-word essays. Model for essay set 1.

Score	1	2	3	4	5	6
# of essays	2847	4758	1626	1045	828	2896

Table 5. Distribution of scores received by one-word essays. Model for essay set 2.

Score	0	1	2	3
# of essays	272	2066	510	3152

Table 6. Distribution of scores received by one-word essays. Model for essay set 3.

Score	0	1	2	3
# of essays	1137	974	172	1717

Table 7. Distribution of scores received by one-word essays. Model for essay set 4.

Score	0	1	2	3	4
# of essays	386	1395	254	265	1700

Table 8. Distribution of scores received by one-word essays. Model for essay set 5.

Score	0	1	2	3	4
# of essays	558	1769	237	259	2177

Table 9. Distribution of scores received by one-word essays. Model for essay set 6.

Score	0-3	4-6	7-9	10-12	13-15	16-17	19-21	22-24	25-27	28-30
# of essays	2027	970	662	2043	352	216	221	312	622	2360

Table 10. Distribution of scores received by one-word essays. Model for essay set 7.

Sco	ore	0-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	46-50	51-55	56-60
# of e	ssays	30	367	557	825	1371	978	756	548	621	1105	2571	1271

Table 11. Distribution of scores received by one-word essays. Model for essay set 8.

Adversarial essays

Original grade: 4 out of 6

Grade after modifications: 5 out of 6

In @DATE1's -world- planet, there are -many- numerous things -found- detected offensive. Everyone has their own opinion -on- concerning what is offensive and what is not. Many parents are becoming -upset- outraged because they think their children are viewing things that they should not. Other -people- citizens are -upset- outraged because they think the libraries are offending their culture or -way- paths of life. This is even taken -to- of the extreme -where- thus -people citizens want censhorship -on- concerning libraries -to- of avoid this, which is -wrong- misguided. Some -people- citizens are becoming concerned -about- toward the materials -in- at libraries. They find these things -to- of be offensive. Everyone is entitled -to- of their own opinion, but there really is nothing anyone can do -if- whether -someone- person is offended.

The world planet is a public place and everywhere we go, something might be found detected offensive. The library librarians is a place for study. It is never attended -to- of offend -someone- person, or bring bad -to- of the -world- planet. It is <u>simply</u> sheer a place to of inform, and if whether someone person is offended by what they see admire, they should stay away from the -library- librarians. I have been -to- of the -library- librarians -many- numerous times, none of which have I ever seen anything offensive. Everything I have ever witnessed at the library librarians is for learning and research. There are certain sections in at the library librarians. If a parent does no neither want their child childhood seeing something, they should keep their -child-childhood -in- at the children's section. I can -assure ensures -you- thou, there is nothing offensive in at the children's section, or else the library librarians would ought not have it in at that section. The owners of these libraries know what is going to of upset outraged people citizens and what will not. If there was truly offensive materials in at the library librarians, those materials would ought be taken out. Also, if whether a person complains, and the materials are -removed- eradicated, it -could- would lessen -someone- person else's chance getting the materials they need. One person -could would think the material is offensive, but -someone - person else might want -to- of learn more -about- toward it. If one is offended by a certain material, all they -simply- sheer must do, is not look at it. The -library- librarians can be compared -to- of a big computer. One can basically find anything there. Asking the library librarians to of censor their materials is like asking the internet to of censor theirs. It is a <u>way-paths</u> of learning and researching and it -would- ought be almost impossible -to- of censor everything there. Everyone is going -to- of be offended some point in- at their life. If the libraries removed- eradicated everything that could would offend someone person, they would ought have no neither materials left. People need to of stop being so easily offended and realize reaching the library- librarians is not trying striving to of harm anyone. There does not need to of be any censorship in at libraries. It is simply sheer trying striving to of teach people citizens about toward the world planet and let them enjoy books, music, movies, or whatever else one might go -to- of the -library- librarians -to- of find.

Original grade: 3 out of 6

Grade after modifications: 4 out of 6

Yes and no, some materials such as books, music, movies, magazines, etc, -should must be -voted adopted upon the citizens to of be removed from shelves. I do think that some materials in those catagories should must be removed if whether they are -offensive abusive -to- of me as well as others, but it will take a long while -to- of get them removed from stores and other places if whether other people like fond them. I do not like fond how they make some music to of be very violent and -eause- provoke -minds- souls of most teenagers -to- of -turn- transform -bad- wicked and start selling drugs drug on the street of their hometown, but i can't do anything about that because that kind of music is admired by those teenagers as well as some adults too. If some people can buckle down and see that stuff -like- fond that will -mess- chaos up lives of teenagers and some adults who fall victim to of it, then there is a chance that it can be stopped. Stopping things elements like fond this will -save rescue a community from disaster and -cause provoke other good chances in life for into people in need -for- into those chances. Here's -another- further example, -like- fond this music artist named @CAPS1 @CAPS2. She has made some -great-wonderful songs -for- into the past year and a half now. People have -told- say me that she is part of a group called @CAPS3 and its a group -where- hence they try -to- of I think 're-birth' thereselves. My -friends boyfriends wanted me to of stop listening to of her music. I told say my friends boyfriends that I do not like fond the fact that she joined this group, but that doesn't mean im gonna stop listen -to- of her music. Now if whether she makes a song that is -offensive- abusive -to- of me and as well as my friends, then that -where- hence I draw the line. What im saying is that if whether people don't have others to of back them up if whether something is highly offensive abusive to of them and oblivious -to- of others, it will be very hard trying -to- of prove yourself in the best -way- manner possible.

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Would -you- thou want your childern reaing about -things- subjects that only @CAPS1 know's what? When -you thou go -to- of a library -you- thou aspect -to- of learn about @CAPS2, @CAPS3, @LOCATION1's @CAPS4,@CAPS5 etc. Libraries -are- constitute for learning new -things- subjects about the world that will -later- subsequently -help- helps -you thou in @CAPS9. When -you- thou first walk into a library -you- thou except -to- of see people checking out @CAPS2 books, or books that catch your eye -just- merely by the title. If we find a book is offensive, or will not -help- helps better our childerns' future -then- upon stand up and fight for their own mental development. We must -also- likewise think of what the childern want -to- of read. They have the right -to- of read what ever they want, as long as it's -entertaining- hilarious -to of them and they -are- constitute learning something new. Some books teaches them about the world they -are- constitute growing up in. There -are- constitute some books that I would not let my own -ehild- childhood read, but I know in my

heart that she is learning something that I @MONTH1 not be able to of teach her. Those types of books of the constitute what I call, '@CAPS7's'. Those books that can come off seeming offensive, when in the end they the constitute actually, what I call appealed '@CAPS8', helping to of the prepare elaborate them for what is it come. Not every book will be full of rainbows, the pretty rather colors, or pop-ups. They must know that they are constitute some people they have to of be mindfull of, and people who are constitute educating them on @CAPS9. They have to of learn the difference between what's right, and what's wrong. Remember the first book thou ever read by yourself? I do. It was called 'Of @CAPS10 and @CAPS11'. I read that book when I was @NUM1. Till this day my mother says, 'I tried to of stop you thou from reading that book therefore many times, it had has dangerous dangers wording that an @NUM1 year should ought no be able to of read at that young age'. What she did not know was that; that book had has taught me alot about the world back then. That knowledge I had has obtain then upon had has helped me later subsequently on my @CAPS9. Some books are constitute ment to of be read while some aren't. If you thou feel your child childhood should ought not read a certain book then upon read it for yourself, and then upon tell your child childhood the reason why they can not read the same book you thou had has just merely read.