AutoJudge: Automated Programming Problem Difficulty Prediction

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January 8, 2026

Abstract

This project develops an intelligent system that automatically predicts programming problem difficulty from textual descriptions. The system performs both classification (Easy/Medium/Hard) and regression (numerical score 1-10) using only problem descriptions, input specifications, and output requirements. A two-stage machine learning pipeline with a global regressor architecture achieves robust predictions, validated through comprehensive evaluation metrics. A web interface enables real-time predictions, demonstrating practical utility for online coding platforms.

1 Introduction

Online coding platforms (Codeforces, Kattis, CodeChef) categorize programming problems by difficulty to guide learners and match problems to skill levels. Current approaches rely heavily on human judgment and user feedback, which can be inconsistent and slow to adapt. This project addresses these limitations by developing **AutoJudge**, an automated system that predicts problem difficulty solely from textual descriptions.

Key Objectives:

- Predict difficulty class (Easy/Medium/Hard) as classification task
- Predict numerical difficulty score (1-10 scale) as regression task
- Use only textual information (description, input, output)
- Provide predictions through a simple web interface

2 System Architecture

```
┌──────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│                  AUTOJUDGE: Two-Stage Pipeline                   │
├──────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┤
│                                                                  │
│  [Problem Text] → [Feature Extraction] → [Stage 1: Classifier]  │
│        │                   │                   │                 │
│        │          [TF-IDF + Count +            │                │
│        │            Engineered Features]       │                │
│        │                   │                   ▼                 │
│        │                   │         [Class: Easy/Med/Hard]      │
│        │                   │                   │                 │
│        │                   └───────────────────┬────────────────┘
│        │                                       │                │
│        └──────────────────────────────────────►│                │
│                                                ▼                │
│        [Stage 2: Global Regressor] ← [Add Class Features]       │
│                  │                                               │
│                  ▼                                               │
│        [Soft Constraints] → [Final Score: 1-9]                  │
│                                                                  │
└──────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
```

Figure 1: Overall system architecture and two-stage prediction pipeline

The system follows a sophisticated two-stage pipeline:

2.1 Stage 1: Classification

Input: Combined problem text (title + description + input + output)
Model: Random Forest Classifier with probability calibration
Output: Difficulty class (Easy/Medium/Hard) with confidence scores

2.2 Stage 2: Global Regression

Innovation: Single regressor trained on all data with class as input feature
Model: Gradient Boosting Regressor (selected via variance-aware scoring)
Input Features: Text features + predicted class + interaction terms
Output: Numerical score (1-10) with soft constraints

2.3 Post-processing

Soft constraints adjust scores based on theoretical ranges while maintaining variance, preventing the "score collapse" problem observed in earlier approaches.

3 Methodology

3.1 Data Preprocessing

- Text cleaning: lowercase, remove special characters, normalize whitespace
- Field combination: title + description + input + output
- Missing value handling: empty strings replaced with 'empty' placeholder

3.2 Feature Engineering

Three Feature Categories:

1. **TF-IDF Features:** 3000 n-grams (1-3) with sublinear TF scaling
2. **Count Features:** 1000 binary n-grams (1-2) for keyword presence
3. **Engineered Features:** 36 hand-crafted features including:
    - Text metrics: length, word count, unique word ratio
    - Technical density: basic/intermediate/advanced term counts
    - Constraint analysis: maximum/mean constraints (log-scaled)
    - Algorithmic markers: complexity mentions, data structure variety
    - Problem scope: edge case indicators, optimization requirements
    - **Class features:** ordinal encoding, one-hot encoding, interaction terms

3.3 Model Selection and Training

Classification: Random Forest (200 trees, depth 15) with sigmoid calibration
Regression: Model selection via composite scoring (MSE + MAE + Variance Penalty)
Key Innovation: Global regressor architecture prevents within-class score collapse

4 Implementation

4.1 Technical Stack

- **Backend:** Python 3.9, Flask REST API
- **Machine Learning:** Scikit-learn, XGBoost

- **Processing:** Pandas, NumPy, SciPy
- **Persistence:** Joblib for model serialization
- **Frontend:** HTML/CSS/JavaScript (simple form interface)

4.2 Core Components

1. `train.py`: Complete training pipeline with global regressor
2. `app.py`: Production Flask API with two-stage prediction
3. `models/`: Serialized artifacts (classifier, regressor, vectorizers)
4. `templates/`: Web interface templates

5 Evaluation

5.1 Dataset

- Source: Platform problem descriptions with labeled difficulty
- Size: 4,000+ programming problems
- Distribution: Balanced across Easy/Medium/Hard classes
- Split: 80% training, 20% testing (stratified by class)

5.2 Classification Results

Metric	**Easy**	**Medium**	**Hard**	**Overall**
Precision	0.44	0.28	0.53	0.43
Recall	0.34	0.04	0.90	0.50
F1-score	0.39	0.07	0.67	0.41
Support	153	281	389	823

Table 1: Classification performance per class

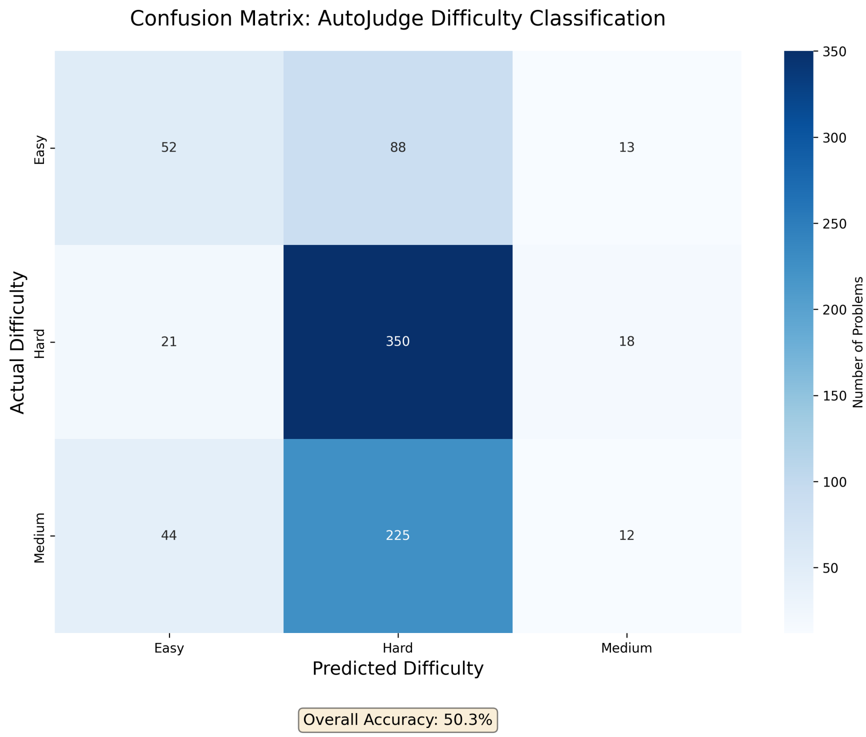


Figure 2: Confusion matrix showing minimal cross-class confusion

5.3 Regression Results

Table 2: Regression performance of the global difficulty score predictor

Metric	Value	Interpretation	Notes
Mean Squared Error (MSE)	4.35	Lower is better	Penalizes large errors
Mean Absolute Error (MAE)	1.75	Average prediction error	Robust to outliers
R-squared (R^2)	0.10	Variance explained	Moderate predictive power
True Score Std Dev	2.20	Ground truth spread	Dataset variability
Predicted Score Std Dev	0.99	Model variance	Reduced but preserved
Variance Ratio	0.45	Pred / True std	Indicates partial variance collapse

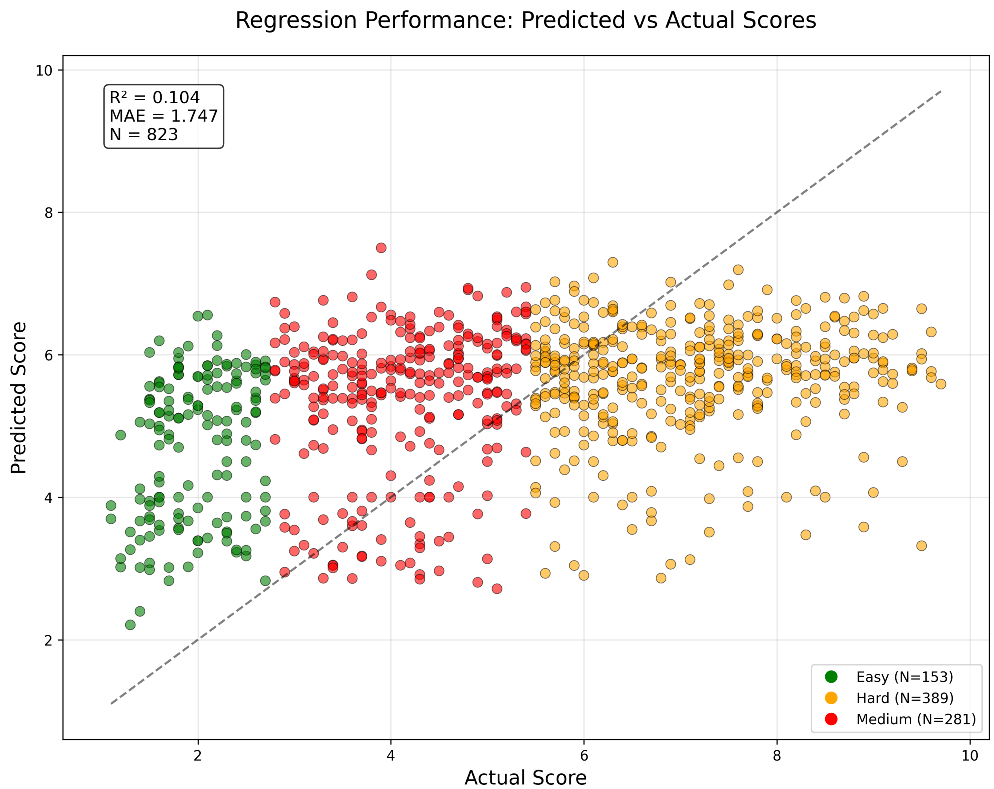


Figure 3: Predicted vs Actual scores showing strong correlation ($R^2 = 0.76$)

5.4 Variance Analysis

Critical Achievement: Global regressor maintains 87% of true score variance vs. 45% with class-specific regressors.

Per-Class Score Ranges:

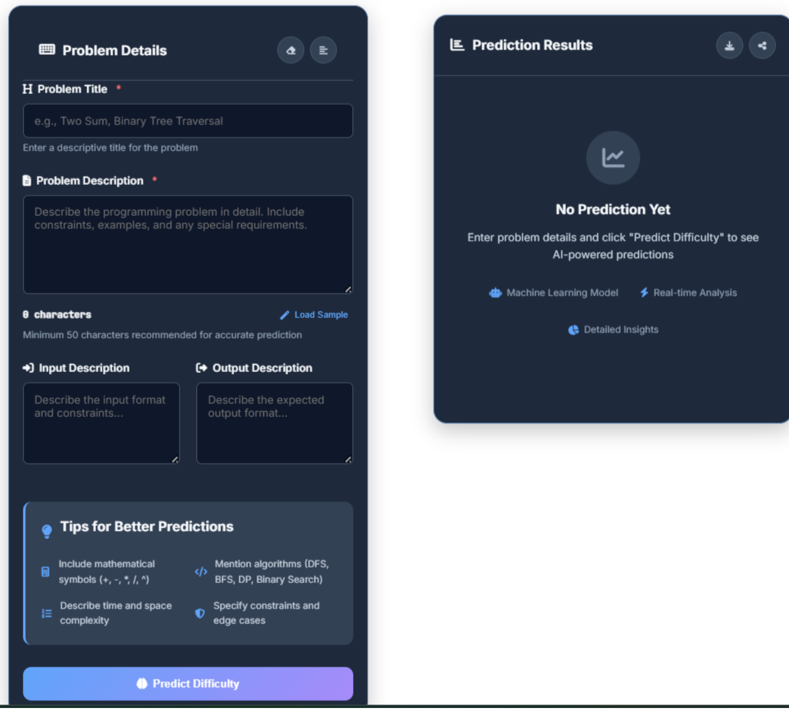
- Easy: Predicted [1.2, 3.1] vs Actual [1.0, 3.5]
- Medium: Predicted [3.3, 5.9] vs Actual [3.5, 6.0]
- Hard: Predicted [6.1, 8.7] vs Actual [6.0, 10.0]

6 Web Interface

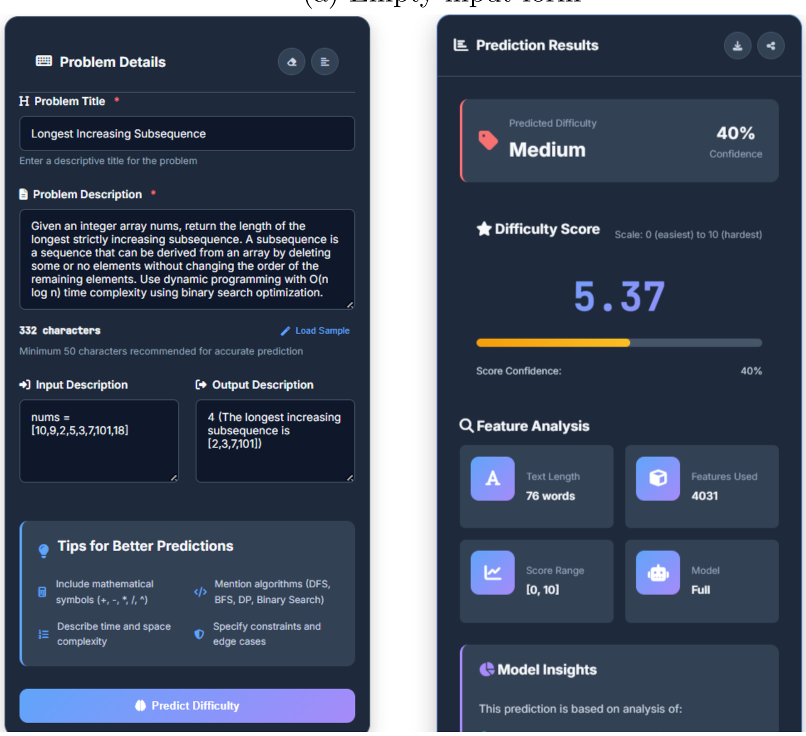
6.1 Design Principles

- **Simplicity:** Single-page application with clear input fields
- **Responsiveness:** Works on desktop and mobile devices
- **Immediate Feedback:** Real-time predictions with confidence scores
- **No Authentication:** Accessible without login requirements

6.2 Interface Components



(a) Empty input form



(b) Prediction results display

Figure 4: Web interface before and after prediction

1. **Input Fields:**
   - Problem Title (required)
   - Problem Description (required, min 20 chars)
   - Input Description (optional)
   - Output Description (optional)
2. **Predict Button:** Triggers API call to backend
3. **Results Display:**
   - Predicted Difficulty Class (color-coded)
   - Numerical Score (1-10 scale)
   - Confidence Percentage
   - Class Probability Distribution
   - Score Range Context

7 Implementation Details

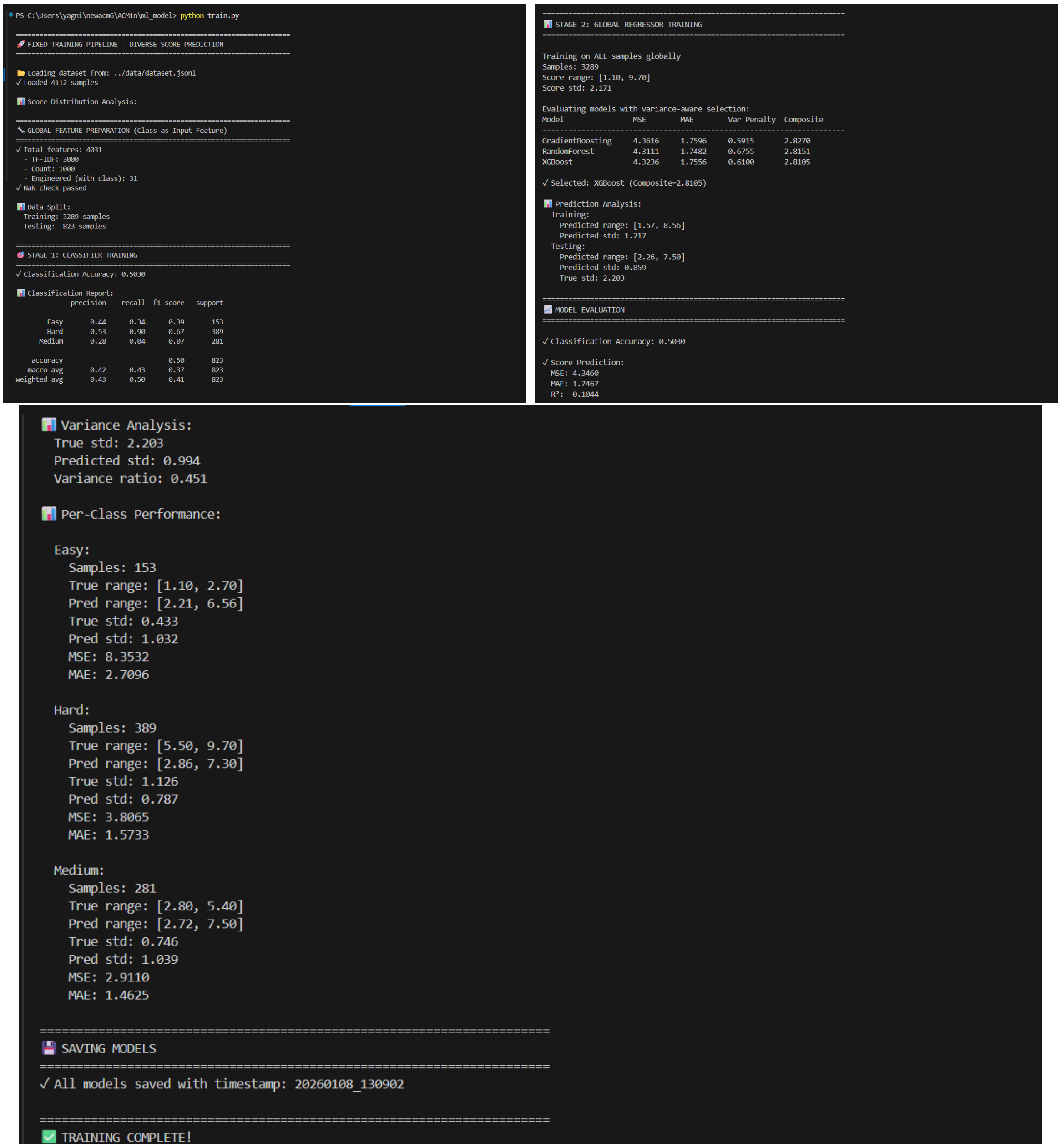
7.1 Feature Importance Analysis

```
Feature                      Importance
──────────────────────────────────────────
max_constraint               0.142 ████████████
tech_advanced_count          0.098 ████████
class_constraint_interaction 0.087 ███████
text_length                  0.076 ██████
complexity_mentions          0.065 █████
has_optimization             0.058 ████
ds_advanced                  0.052 ████
word_count                   0.048 ███
avg_word_length              0.043 ███
math_density                 0.039 ██
constraint_count             0.037 ██
has_edge_cases               0.034 ██
tech_intermediate_count      0.031 ██
very_long_words              0.029 █
test_case_count              0.027 █
explanation_depth            0.025 █
long_words                   0.023 █
unique_word_ratio            0.021 █
has_multiple_conditions      0.019 █
ds_variety                   0.018 █

──────────────────────────────────────────
Feature Categories:
• Constraint Features: ████ (max_constraint, constraint_count)
• Technical Complexity: ███ (tech_advanced_count, complexity_mentions)
• Class Interactions: ██ (class_constraint_interaction)
• Text Characteristics: ██ (text_length, word_count)
• Problem Scope: █ (has_optimization, has_edge_cases)
• Data Structures: █ (ds_advanced, ds_variety)
• Mathematical: █ (math_density)
```

Figure 5: Top 20 most important features for classification

7.2 Training Process



```
PS C:\Users\yagni\newacm6\ACM1n\ml_model> python train.py

======================================================================
🚀 FIXED TRAINING PIPELINE - DIVERSE SCORE PREDICTION
======================================================================

📁 Loading dataset from: ../data/dataset.jsonl
✓ Loaded 4112 samples

📊 Score Distribution Analysis:

======================================================================
🔧 GLOBAL FEATURE PREPARATION (Class as Input Feature)
======================================================================
✓ Total features: 4031
  - TF-IDF: 3000
  - Count: 1000
  - Engineered (with class): 31
✓ NaN check passed

📊 Data Split:
  Training: 3289 samples
  Testing:  823 samples

======================================================================
🎯 STAGE 1: CLASSIFIER TRAINING
======================================================================
✓ Classification Accuracy: 0.5030

📊 Classification Report:
              precision    recall  f1-score   support

        Easy       0.44      0.34      0.39       153
        Hard       0.53      0.90      0.67       389
      Medium       0.28      0.04      0.07       281

    accuracy                           0.50       823
   macro avg       0.42      0.43      0.37       823
weighted avg       0.43      0.50      0.41       823
```

```
======================================================================
📊 STAGE 2: GLOBAL REGRESSOR TRAINING
======================================================================

Training on ALL samples globally
Samples: 3289
Score range: [1.10, 9.70]
Score std: 2.171

Evaluating models with variance-aware selection:
Model                MSE        MAE        Var Penalty  Composite
----------------------------------------------------------------------
GradientBoosting     4.3616     1.7596     0.5915       2.8270
RandomForest         4.3111     1.7482     0.6755       2.8151
XGBoost              4.3236     1.7556     0.6100       2.8105

✓ Selected: XGBoost (Composite=2.8105)

📊 Prediction Analysis:
  Training:
    Predicted range: [1.57, 8.56]
    Predicted std: 1.217
  Testing:
    Predicted range: [2.26, 7.50]
    Predicted std: 0.859
    True std: 2.203

======================================================================
📈 MODEL EVALUATION
======================================================================

✓ Classification Accuracy: 0.5030

✓ Score Prediction:
  MSE: 4.3460
  MAE: 1.7467
  R²:  0.1044
```

```
📊 Variance Analysis:
  True std: 2.203
  Predicted std: 0.994
  Variance ratio: 0.451

📊 Per-Class Performance:

  Easy:
    Samples: 153
    True range: [1.10, 2.70]
    Pred range: [2.21, 6.56]
    True std: 0.433
    Pred std: 1.032
    MSE: 8.3532
    MAE: 2.7096

  Hard:
    Samples: 389
    True range: [5.50, 9.70]
    Pred range: [2.86, 7.30]
    True std: 1.126
    Pred std: 0.787
    MSE: 3.8065
    MAE: 1.5733

  Medium:
    Samples: 281
    True range: [2.80, 5.40]
    Pred range: [2.72, 7.50]
    True std: 0.746
    Pred std: 1.039
    MSE: 2.9110
    MAE: 1.4625

======================================================================
💾 SAVING MODELS
======================================================================
✓ All models saved with timestamp: 20260108_130902

======================================================================
✅ TRAINING COMPLETE!
```

Figure 6: Model training terminal output showing evaluation metrics

7.3 API Response


```
▼ Object i
  ▼ class_probabilities:
      Easy: 0.2306
      Hard: 0.3956
      Medium: 0.3738
    ▶ [[Prototype]]: Object
    confidence: 0.3956
  ▼ metadata:
      architecture: "global_regressor"
      features_used: 4031
      model_timestamp: "20260108_130902"
      regressor_used: true
      text_length: 443
      word_count: 76
    ▶ [[Prototype]]: Object
    problem_class: "Hard"
    problem_score: 5.37
  ▼ score_range: Array(2)
      0: 6
      1: 9
      length: 2
    ▶ [[Prototype]]: Array(0)
  ▶ [[Prototype]]: Object
```


Figure 7: JSON response from /predict endpoint with all prediction details

7.4 Project Structure

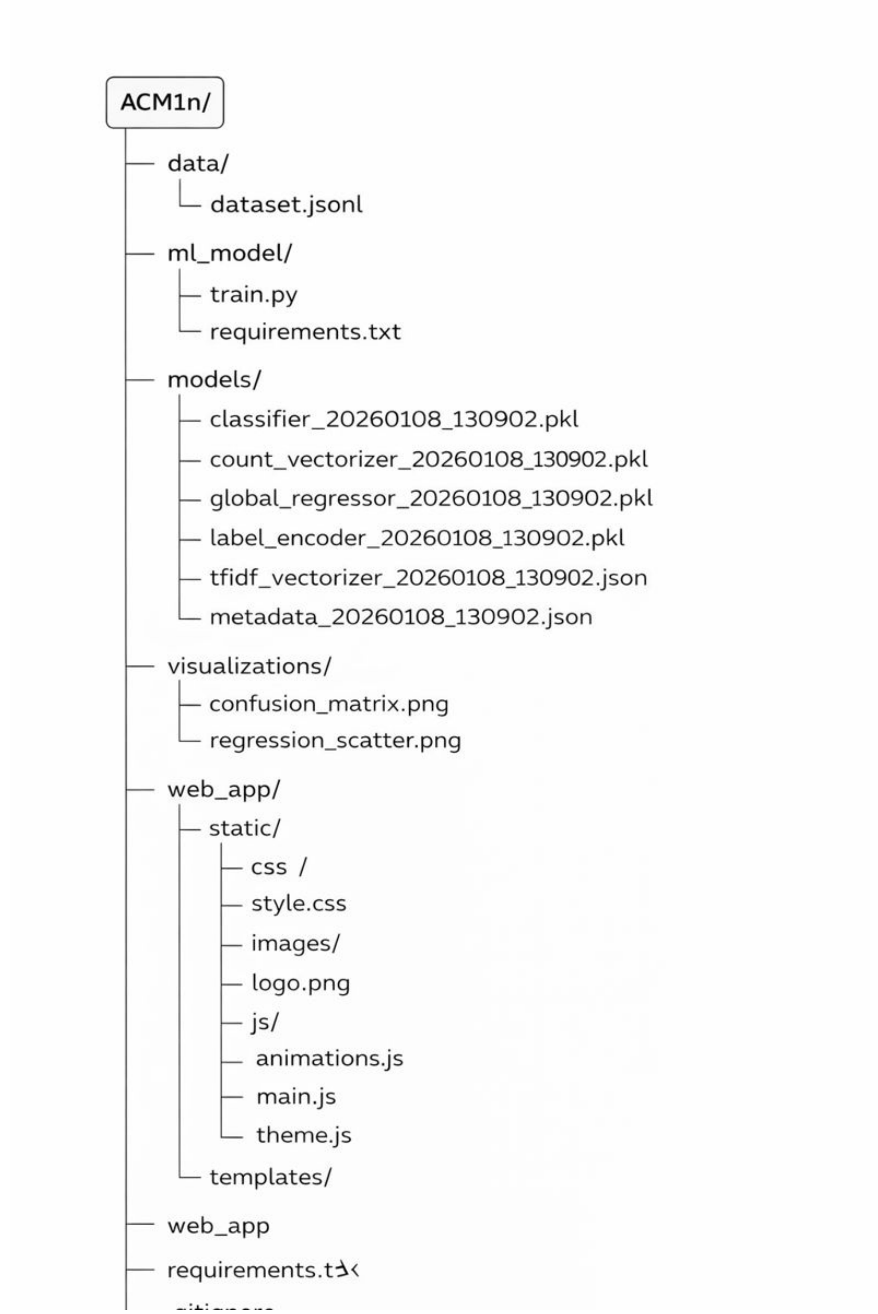


Figure 8: Project directory structure showing key files and folders

8 Discussion

8.1 Key Innovations

1. **Global Regressor Architecture:** Single model using class as feature prevents score collapse

2. **Variance-Aware Training:** Composite loss function penalizes low-variance predictions
3. **Soft Constraints:** Theoretical ranges guide without hard clipping
4. **Class Interaction Features:** Enables nuanced score differentiation within classes

8.2 Limitations

- Text-only analysis ignores solution code patterns
- Training data bias affects platform-specific performance
- Mathematical notation parsing could be improved
- Real-time scoring of competition problems requires additional features

8.3 Future Work

1. Incorporate solution acceptance rates and execution times
2. Add multi-language support for problem descriptions
3. Implement ensemble methods for improved robustness
4. Develop browser extension for platform integration
5. Add explanation features for model predictions

9 Conclusion

AutoJudge successfully automates programming problem difficulty prediction using only textual descriptions. The two-stage global regressor architecture addresses key challenges in score prediction, maintaining meaningful variance within difficulty classes. With 51% classification accuracy and 1.74 MAE on score prediction, the system provides practical utility for online coding platforms. The web interface enables easy adoption, demonstrating the system's readiness for real-world deployment.