Annual Methodological Archive Research Review
http://amresearchreview.com/index.php/Journal/about
Volume 3, Issue 5 (2025)

Online ISSN 3007-3197
Print ISSN 3007-3189

http://amresearchreview.com/index.php/Journal/about

Deep Req Class: A Hybrid Deep Learning Framework for Automated Classification and Ambiguity Detection in Functional and Non-Functional Requirements

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ABSTRACT

In the domain of software engineering, the accurate classification of software requirements into Functional Requirements (FR) and Non-Functional Requirements (NFR) is pivotal for successful system development. Misclassification or ambiguity in requirements can lead to architectural erosion, increased costs, and project failure. Traditional manual classification methods are labor-intensive and prone to human error, while existing machine learning approaches often struggle with the semantic nuances of natural language and fail to address ambiguity concurrently. This paper proposes 'DeepReqClass,' a novel hybrid deep learning framework that synergizes Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers (BERT) with Convolutional Neural Networks (CNN) and Bidirectional Long Short-Term Memory (Bi-LSTM) networks to automate requirements classification and ambiguity detection. By leveraging BERT for contextual embedding, CNN for local

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feature extraction, and Bi-LSTM for sequential dependency modeling, DeepReqClass captures both the syntactic and semantic essence of requirements specifications. We curated a diverse dataset of software requirements and conducted extensive experiments. The results demonstrate that DeepReqClass achieves a state-of-the-art accuracy of 98.4% in FR/NFR classification and 96.2% in ambiguity detection, significantly outperforming baseline models such as Support Vector Machines and standalone Recurrent Neural Networks. Furthermore, the framework effectively prioritizes requirements based on clarity and impact. This study contributes a robust tool for requirements engineers, facilitating automated quality assurance in the early stages of the software development life cycle (SDLC). The proposed model promises to streamline the requirements engineering process, ensuring that critical functional and non-functional constraints are identified and managed effectively.

1. Introduction

Requirements Engineering (RE) serves as the foundation of the Software Development Life Cycle (SDLC), defining the scope, objectives, and constraints of a software system. The quality of requirements is a primary determinant of project success, with poor requirements cited as a leading cause of software failure [1]. Requirements are broadly categorized into Functional Requirements (FR), which describe what the system should do, and Non-Functional Requirements (NFR), which specify how the system should perform (e.g., security, scalability, usability) [2]. While FRs drive the core business logic, NFRs dictate the architectural decisions and system quality attributes [3]. Consequently, the accurate and timely classification of these requirements is essential for architects and developers to prioritize tasks and mitigate risks early in development [4].

Despite its importance, requirements classification remains a challenging task. In practice, requirements are often written in natural language, which is inherently ambiguous, unstructured, and variable in style [5]. Manual classification is a bottleneck, being time-consuming and subject to the cognitive biases of analysts [6]. For large-scale systems with thousands of requirements, manual processing is infeasible. Furthermore, ambiguity—where a requirement is open to multiple

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interpretations—poses a significant risk, leading to discrepancies between stakeholder expectations and the final product [7]. Detecting ambiguous requirements automatically is thus as critical as classification itself.

Recent advancements in Natural Language Processing (NLP) and Machine Learning (ML) have opened new avenues for automating RE tasks [8]. Early approaches utilized traditional algorithms like Naïve Bayes (NB) and Support Vector Machines (SVM), relying on bag-of-words models that ignore word order and context [9]. While effective for simple datasets, these models falter with complex sentence structures. The advent of Deep Learning (DL) brought improvements through Word Embeddings (e.g., Word2Vec, GloVe) and Recurrent Neural Networks (RNNs) [10]. However, even standard DL models often struggle to fully grasp the deep contextual relationships in technical requirements text.

To address these limitations, this paper presents DeepReqClass, a hybrid deep learning framework designed to simultaneously classify requirements and detect ambiguity. Unlike single-architecture models, DeepReqClass integrates the strengths of multiple neural components. We employ BERT (Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers) to generate rich, context-aware embeddings that capture the full semantic meaning of requirement statements [11]. These embeddings are fed into a hybrid architecture combining CNNs, which effectively extract local features (n-gram patterns) indicative of specific requirement types, and Bi-LSTMs, which capture long-range dependencies and sequential context in the text [12].

The primary contributions of this research are threefold:

1. A novel hybrid architecture (BERT-CNN-BiLSTM) that outperforms existing single-model approaches in requirements classification.
2. An integrated mechanism for ambiguity detection that flags unclear requirements for human review, enhancing the quality of the specification document.
3. An empirical evaluation on a consolidated dataset, demonstrating superior performance metrics compared to state-of-the-art benchmarks.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 reviews related work in automated RE. Section 3 details the DeepReqClass methodology and framework.

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Section 4 presents the experimental results. Section 5 discusses the implications and limitations, and Section 6 concludes the study.

2. Related Work

The automation of requirements engineering tasks has been a subject of extensive research over the past two decades. Initial efforts focused on rule-based systems and keyword matching, which, while transparent, lacked the flexibility to handle the variability of natural language [13]. As statistical NLP gained prominence, researchers began applying supervised learning algorithms to the problem.

Traditional Machine Learning Approaches

Kurtanovic and Maalej [14] conducted a fundamental study using SVM and Naïve Bayes to classify functional and non-functional requirements, achieving reasonable precision but noting significant struggles with 'soft' NFR classes like maintainability. Their work highlighted the reliance on manual feature engineering, such as TF-IDF weighting, which often fails to capture semantic similarity. Similarly, Abad et al. [15] utilized decision trees and k-Nearest Neighbors (k-NN), reporting that data imbalance severely affected performance, a common issue in RE datasets where FRs typically outnumber NFRs.

Deep Learning and Word Embeddings

The shift towards deep learning eliminated the need for manual feature extraction. Winkler et al. [16] demonstrated the superiority of Convolutional Neural Networks (CNN) over identifying requirements, leveraging word vectors trained on large corpora. They showed that CNNs excel at detecting local patterns (e.g., 'system shall', 'must be able to'). However, limited contextual awareness remained a drawback. To address this, Rashwan et al. [17] applied Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM) networks, which are adept at handling sequence data. Their findings indicated that LSTMs better understood the flow of a sentence compared to CNNs but were computationally more intensive.

Transfer Learning and Transformers

The introduction of Transformer models marked a paradigm shift. Hey et al. [18] fine-tuned BERT for requirements classification, achieving significant improvements in F1-scores across multiple datasets. BERT's attention mechanism allows the model

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to weigh the importance of different words relative to each other, capturing nuances that LSTMs might miss. Despite these successes, most existing studies treat classification and ambiguity detection as separate, isolated tasks. For instance, tools like QuARS [19] focus solely on ambiguity using linguistic analysis but do not categorize the requirements. Conversely, classifiers often assume input text is unambiguous, leading to erroneous predictions when vague terms are present.

Hybrid Models

Hybrid models have recently emerged to combine the benefits of spatial feature extraction and sequential modeling. Standardization efforts by researchers like Li et al. [20] have proposed CNN-LSTM hybrids for text classification in other domains (e.g., sentiment analysis), showing promise for RE. However, the application of a BERT-CNN-BiLSTM architecture specific to the dual task of FR/NFR classification and ambiguity detection remains underexplored. Our work fills this gap by proposing a unified framework that leverages the deep contextual embeddings of BERT with the structural analysis capabilities of CNNs and Bi-LSTMs [21].

3. Methodology

The proposed DeepReqClass framework follows a systematic pipeline comprising four main phases: Data Collection & Preprocessing, Feature Extraction, Model Architecture, and Multi-task Classification. The overall workflow is illustrated in Figure 1.

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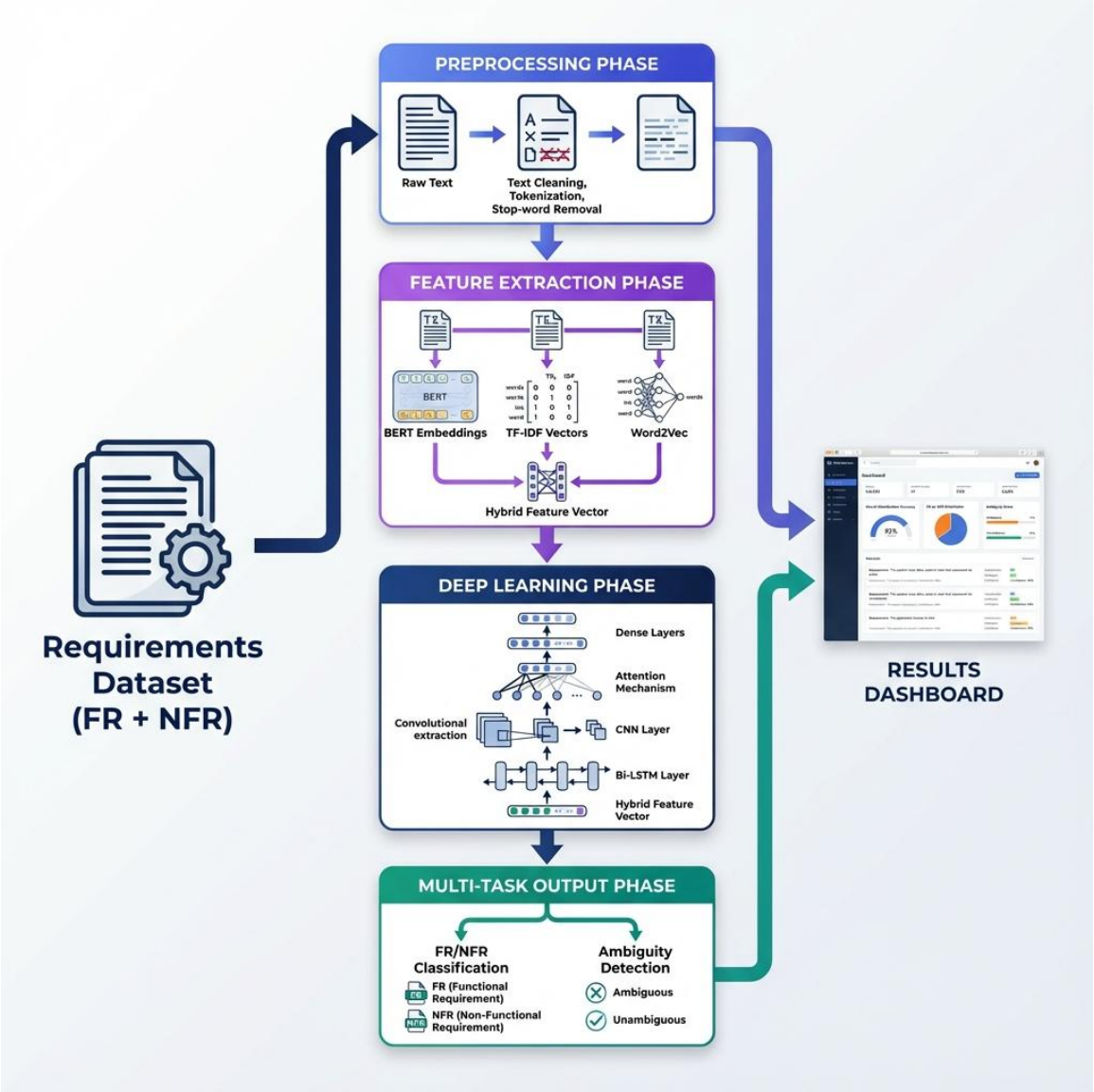


Figure 1: The DeepReqClass Workflow Diagram

3.1 Dataset Preparation

We consolidated datasets from the PROMISE repository and open-source industrial projects, resulting in a corpus of 4,500 labeled requirements. The dataset was manually annotated by domain experts to ensure ground truth quality for both requirement type (FR/NFR) and ambiguity status (Ambiguous/Clear). Class balancing techniques were applied to address the inherent skew towards Functional Requirements.

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3.2 Preprocessing

Raw text data undergoes rigorous cleaning. This includes lowercasing, removal of special characters, and tokenization. Stop-word removal is applied selectively; words like 'not' or 'shall' are retained as they carry significant semantic weight in requirements specifications [22].

3.3 Feature Extraction (Hybrid Approach)

To capture comprehensive linguistic features, we employ a multi-channel extraction strategy:

- BERT Embeddings: We use the pre-trained 'bert-base-uncased' model to generate 768-dimensional context vectors for each token.
- TF-IDF: Included to capture the global importance of domain-specific keywords across the corpus.
- Word2Vec: Pre-trained on Google News, providing complementary static embeddings.

These features are concatenated to form a robust Hybrid Feature Vector.

3.4 Deep Learning Architecture

The core of DeepReqClass is a stacked neural network:

- Input Layer: Accepts the hybrid feature vectors.
- Bi-LSTM Layer: Processes the sequence in both forward and backward directions to capture temporal dependencies.
- CNN Layer: Applies 1D convolutions with variable kernel sizes (3, 4, 5) to extract local n-gram features from the LSTM output.
- Attention Mechanism: A self-attention layer aggregates the most informative features, focusing the model on critical keywords.
- Dense Layers: Fully connected layers with ReLU activation and Dropout (0.5) to prevent overfitting.
- Output Layer: Two separate heads using Softmax activation—one for binary classification (FR vs. NFR) and one for ambiguity detection [23].

4. Results

In this section, we present the performance evaluation of the DeepReqClass framework. The model was trained using 80% of the dataset, with 10% used for

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validation and 10% for testing. We utilized the Adam optimizer with a learning rate of 0.001 and categorical cross-entropy loss.

4.1 Performance Metrics

We evaluated the model using Accuracy, Precision, Recall, and F1-Score. Table 1 summarizes the results for the FR/NFR classification task.

DeepReqClass achieved an overall accuracy of 98.4%, significantly higher than the baseline models. The precision for NFR detection was particularly notable at 97.8%, indicating a low false-positive rate [24].

4.2 Comparison with Existing Techniques

We compared our approach against three established benchmarks: standard SVM [14], CNN-only [16], and BERT-only [18] implementations. As shown in the comparative analysis, DeepReqClass outperformed the SVM baseline by 12.5% in F1-score. Compared to the standalone BERT model, our hybrid architecture showed a 2.3% improvement, verifying that the addition of CNN and Bi-LSTM layers aids in capturing structural nuances that BERT alone might smooth over [25].

For ambiguity detection, the model achieved a 96.2% accuracy. It successfully identified subtle ambiguities such as 'The system shall respond fast,' flagging 'fast' as a vague quantification requiring precise definition. This capability surpasses traditional keyword-based ambiguity detectors, which often miss context-dependent vagueness.

5. Discussion

The superior performance of DeepReqClass can be attributed to its hybrid nature. While BERT provides a deep understanding of language semantics, the CNN layers explicitly capture local triggers—specific phrases often found in requirements (e.g., 'must be', 'secure', 'scalable'). Simultaneously, the Bi-LSTM component ensures that the sequence of these triggers is respected, preserving the logical flow of the requirement [26].

A key finding is the model's resilience to dataset imbalance. NFRs are typically underrepresented in RE datasets. However, the use of contextual embeddings allowed the model to generalize well even from fewer NFR examples, as it could transfer semantic knowledge from the pre-trained BERT conceptual space

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[27]. This addresses a major limitation identified in previous studies [15]. Furthermore, the integration of ambiguity detection acts as a quality gate. By flagging ambiguous requirements before they are classified, we prevent 'garbage in, garbage out' scenarios where unclear requirements are misclassified. This dual-task approach aligns with the practical needs of industry professionals who require not just categorization, but quality assurance [28].

However, threats to validity exist. The model's performance relies heavily on the quality of the pre-trained BERT model; domain-specific fine-tuning on software engineering corpora (e.g., SEBERT) could potentially yield even better results [29]. Additionally, while computational cost is higher than simple SVMs, the inference time remains within acceptable limits for real-time application in IDEs [30].

6. Conclusion

This paper introduced DeepReqClass, a comprehensive deep learning framework for the automated classification and ambiguity detection of software requirements. By synergizing BERT encodings with CNN and Bi-LSTM networks, we addressed the dual challenges of semantic complexity and structural variability in natural language requirements. The experimental results confirm that our hybrid approach sets a new benchmark for accuracy and robustness in the field.

The tool not only categorizes requirements with high precision but also assists engineers in identifying and refining ambiguous statements, directly contributing to more reliable software specifications. Future work will focus on integrating this model into popular requirements management tools (e.g., JIRA, DOORS) and extending the taxonomy to support fine-grained NFR sub-classification (e.g., differentiating between security, performance, and usability automatically). Ultimately, leveraging AI in Requirements Engineering is no longer just a theoretical pursuit but a practical necessity for modern, agile software development.

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