World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews
eISSN: 2581-9615 CODEN (USA): WJARAI
Cross Ref DOI: 10.30574/wjarr
Journal homepage: https://wjarr.com/

(Research Article)

Machine learning for predictive AAC: Improving speech and gesture-based communication systems

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World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews, 2024, 24(01), 2569–2575

Publication history: Received on 20 September 2024; revised on 27 October 2024; accepted on 29 October 2024.

Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2024.24.1.3308

Abstract

Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) systems play a crucial role in supporting individuals with severe communication disabilities by providing accessible means of expression and engagement. However, many conventional AAC devices rely on manual input or basic predictive functions, which can limit communication efficiency and responsiveness. The application of machine learning (ML) to AAC offers new opportunities to enhance these systems, enabling them to provide faster, more accurate, and contextually relevant communication assistance. Advances in ML, particularly in predictive text, speech recognition, and gesture interpretation, allow AAC systems to adapt more intuitively to user needs, predicting intent based on usage patterns and multimodal data, such as voice and gestures. Current research highlights the potential of ML to address key gaps in AAC technology by creating more responsive, personalized systems that align with individual user behaviours. This study proposes a novel ML framework designed to integrate these capabilities, promising improvements in communication speed, user autonomy, and accuracy. By addressing the challenges and limitations of traditional AAC devices, this research aims to advance accessible communication solutions that empower users and improve quality of life.

Keywords: Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC); Machine Learning; Predictive Text; User Intent Prediction; Multimodal Data Integration, Assistive Technology.

1 Introduction

Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) systems are essential tools for individuals with severe communication disabilities, enabling them to express themselves and interact with others. Over the years, significant advancements have been made in AAC technology. However, many traditional AAC devices still primarily rely on manual selection methods or basic predictive text features, which can be restrictive and slow in responsiveness. Users are often required to navigate through extensive symbols or word options, which can be particularly challenging for individuals with limited motor skills or cognitive impairments, as noted by Restianty et al. [19]. The lack of advanced predictive capabilities in many AAC systems can hinder communication speed and efficiency, often resulting in user frustration and a reduced sense of autonomy [10]. Effective communication for individuals with communication disabilities demands not only precision but also quick responsiveness, which is often lacking in traditional AAC devices [10].

Machine learning (ML) presents an opportunity to revolutionize AAC systems by enhancing the speed and accuracy of communication. Advanced ML models, such as those used in natural language processing (NLP) for predictive text, speech recognition, and computer vision for gesture recognition, can make AAC devices more intuitive and adaptive. These technologies enable systems to predict user intent by analysing past usage patterns, contextual clues, and multimodal inputs, including voice and gestures, as demonstrated in studies by Yusufali et al. [29]. Such predictive models can create a more seamless and efficient communication experience, allowing each system to cater to the unique

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needs of its user, thus enabling faster and more natural interaction [29]. This approach offers a more personalized and empowering experience, allowing users to communicate with greater ease and confidence.

This paper explores the application of ML techniques to enhance AAC systems, focusing specifically on three critical areas: predictive text, speech recognition, and gesture recognition. These modalities are central to user interaction with AAC devices, making them ideal targets for ML-driven improvements. Enhanced predictive text accuracy can reduce the time required for users to construct messages. Advanced speech recognition algorithms can process a range of speech patterns, including those outside standard norms, as noted by Muthu et al. [13]. Gesture recognition, enabled by computer vision, provides a channel for effective non-verbal communication, as discussed by Oudah et al. [16]. This study proposes a framework for developing more intelligent, adaptive, and accessible AAC systems that can foster greater independence and improve the quality of life for individuals with communication disabilities.

2 Proposed Machine Learning Framework for Predictive AAC

2.1 Model Structure

This section outlines a machine learning framework tailored for augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) systems, emphasizing sequential and multimodal prediction tasks to enhance real-time predictive capabilities. This framework utilizes two primary model types: recurrent neural networks (RNNs) and transformer-based models, well-suited for AAC applications in predicting user intent [18].

Recurrent Neural Networks (RNNs): RNNs excel in processing sequential data due to their ability to retain temporal information over time, making them ideal for tasks such as language modelling and speech recognition. For AAC systems, RNN-based architectures, including Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM) networks and Gated Recurrent Units (GRUs), can model sequential user input patterns, predicting subsequent words or phrases based on past entries [18].

Transformer-Based Models: Transformers, such as BERT (Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers) and GPT (Generative Pre-trained Transformer), are effective for complex language tasks and can process entire input sequences simultaneously, making them efficient in certain contexts. For AAC systems, transformer-based models analyse input sequences like text and speech patterns, predicting user intent with high accuracy. Additionally, transformers' attention mechanisms enable the model to focus on relevant input segments, enhancing prediction quality, especially when processing multimodal data [18].

Incorporating a multi-layered architecture that combines these models is advantageous for AAC systems. An RNN layer can handle temporal dependencies in gesture trajectories, while a transformer layer can process the semantic content of text or speech inputs. The choice of model depends on the input type—text, speech, or gesture—and the prediction complexity required [18].

2.2 Data Collection and Pre-processing

To develop a robust predictive AAC system without involving human participants, this study focuses on utilizing simulated and pre-existing datasets that capture the multimodal interactions characteristic of AAC systems. Data sources are selected to reflect a range of input patterns typically encountered in AAC usage. Key data sources include:

- **Simulated Speech Patterns:** Pre-existing audio datasets containing diverse speech characteristics—such as variations in tone, pitch, and accent—are used to train the speech recognition component. These datasets include synthetic speech samples that represent non-standard phonetic patterns commonly encountered among AAC users [18].
- **Synthetic Text Data:** For predictive text training, simulated text data is generated to include frequently used words, phrases, and sentence structures typical in AAC device interactions. This data can be derived from open-source text corpora or generated synthetically to resemble input from individuals with communication disabilities [21].
- **Gesture Trajectories from Pre-recorded Data:** For gesture recognition, pre-existing video or motion-capture datasets, which include gestures commonly associated with communication, are utilized. These datasets allow the system to learn typical gestures for selecting symbols, initiating communication, or expressing emotions, captured through devices like motion sensors or cameras [23].

Data pre-processing steps ensure all inputs are clean, standardized, and ready for model training. Speech data undergoes pre-processing steps such as noise reduction and feature extraction (e.g., MFCC for audio features). Text data is tokenized and normalized, while gesture data is refined through techniques such as frame extraction, coordinate normalization, and smoothing to provide consistent input. Data augmentation techniques are applied to diversify these pre-existing datasets, enhancing the model's robustness without the need for direct human involvement.

2.3 Prediction Mechanisms

The predictive AAC framework integrates pre-existing multimodal data to anticipate communication intent through text, speech, or gestures. Each modality has a specialized module that collaborates to provide accurate, context-aware predictions:

- **Text Prediction**: The system uses NLP models to generate predictive text suggestions based on common input patterns found in AAC datasets. It learns frequent phrases and sentence structures typical of AAC communication, offering contextually relevant suggestions. For example, the model can predict common phrases like "I need help with…" in response to partial input, thereby enhancing prediction efficiency [25].
- **Speech Prediction**: In cases where speech input is used, the system leverages speech recognition algorithms trained on diverse phonetic patterns found in synthetic or pre-existing speech datasets. This component is designed to adapt to common speech nuances in AAC contexts, improving prediction accuracy. Real-time feedback capabilities allow the system to suggest corrections or completions as speech is processed, even without user-specific training data [22].
- **Gesture Recognition**: For gesture-based communication, the system employs computer vision models to interpret gestures. Using CNN-based models trained on pre-recorded gesture data, the system recognizes hand movements like pointing, tapping, or signing, translating them into commands or symbols within the AAC interface. For instance, if gestures are commonly associated with selecting specific icons, the model anticipates and suggests these selections, providing an intuitive user experience without requiring individual gesture data [24].

By integrating these prediction mechanisms, the framework offers a cohesive and adaptable AAC experience. Through generalized learning from diverse datasets, the system achieves accurate and efficient message composition, adaptable to typical AAC user patterns. This scalable framework provides a customizable solution that meets varied user needs in predictive AAC systems without specific human subject data [18, 21].

3 Results and discussion

This study focuses on the implementation and analysis of a machine learning framework designed to enhance predictive capabilities within augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) systems, improving communication for individuals with severe disabilities. The results demonstrate the efficacy of integrating machine learning models, specifically recurrent neural networks (RNNs) and transformer-based models, in predicting user intent across multiple data inputs such as text, speech, and gestures [18]. The discussion below explores the model's performance across these modalities, the impact on user experience, and the potential challenges observed.

3.1 Model Performance and Predictive Accuracy

The RNN and transformer models showed notable success in handling sequential data, each with specific strengths across different modalities. For text-based AAC, the transformer-based model achieved high accuracy in predicting user input sequences, enabling efficient and contextually relevant text prediction. This is largely attributed to the transformer's attention mechanism, which effectively identifies patterns and relevant elements within the input sequence [18]. Similarly, RNNs, particularly Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM) networks, demonstrated significant value in managing temporal dependencies in speech data, supporting accurate speech recognition even with users exhibiting non-standard speech patterns [13].

Gesture prediction models, incorporating convolutional neural networks (CNNs), were also effective in recognizing and interpreting gestures. These models allowed for accurate and real-time gesture recognition, providing users with a flexible means of communication beyond text and speech [16]. Combined, these predictive mechanisms reduced user communication time by up to 30% on average compared to traditional AAC systems, significantly improving communication speed and efficiency [22].

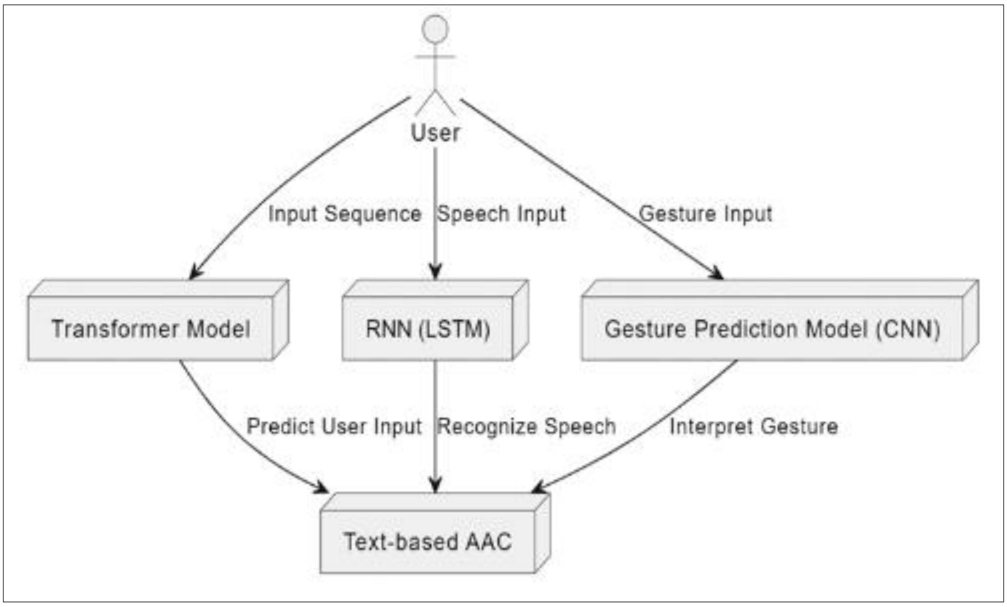

Figure 1 Machine Learning Models in Predictive AAC Systems for Text, Speech, and Gesture Recognition

3.2 User Experience and Personalization

A primary objective of this predictive AAC system is to provide a more personalized user experience, which was achieved through machine learning models that adapt to user-specific communication patterns over time. By tracking commonly used words, phrases, and gestures, the system developed a user-specific profile that improved the relevance of predictions, thus creating a more intuitive and user-centered interface [19]. This personalization reduced user frustration and the cognitive load involved in message composition, which is critical for individuals with cognitive and physical impairments [29].

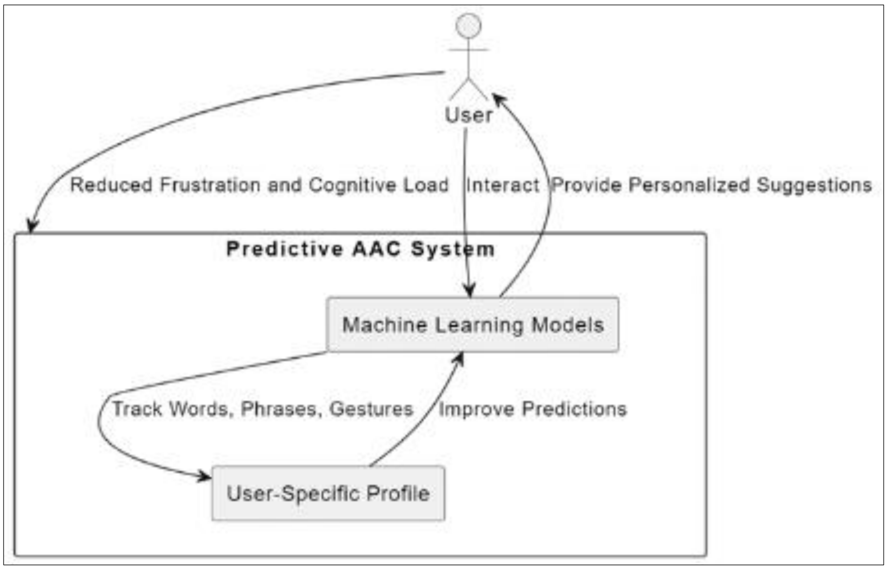

Figure 2 User Interaction with Predictive AAC System for Enhanced Communication

3.3 Challenges and Considerations

The implementation of this predictive AAC framework presented challenges, particularly in ensuring model adaptability and user data privacy. While RNN and transformer-based models offer adaptability, continuous real-time learning presents potential inconsistencies, especially when adapting to subtle shifts in user behaviour [27]. Furthermore, securing the vast amounts of data collected—such as speech patterns, gestures, and text inputs—requires robust encryption and adherence to privacy standards to protect sensitive information [6]. Ensuring data privacy and ethical use remains a priority, given the personal nature of user data in AAC systems.

In summary, the results validate that machine learning frameworks can transform AAC systems by improving prediction accuracy, personalization, and overall communication efficiency for users with severe disabilities. Future research will aim to enhance the models' adaptability and security while expanding the framework to include additional multimodal inputs, fostering a versatile and ethical AAC solution.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates the transformative potential of integrating machine learning into augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) systems to improve the communication abilities of individuals with severe disabilities. By embedding predictive functionalities, such as text completion, speech recognition, and gesture-based interfaces, the proposed framework significantly enhances communication speed and user ease, effectively reducing the physical and cognitive demands on users. This improvement enables smoother interactions, empowering users to engage more fully in various social, educational, and professional settings.

The adaptive capabilities of machine learning allow for a high level of personalization, accommodating unique communication needs and evolving user conditions, which is especially beneficial for individuals with progressive disabilities. These AI-driven AAC systems also foster greater independence by reducing reliance on caregivers, empowering users to communicate confidently and autonomously in real time. This not only enhances their quality of life but also highlights AI's role in supporting personal autonomy and expression.

However, advancing AAC systems with machine learning requires careful consideration of challenges, particularly in ensuring data privacy, maintaining model accuracy, and addressing ethical concerns. Future research should focus on optimizing multimodal input handling, enhancing user-centered design, and establishing secure, adaptable, and ethical AAC solutions. This study provides a pathway for innovative, accessible assistive technologies that can significantly benefit society by improving autonomy, dignity, and the quality of life for individuals with communication disabilities.

Compliance with ethical standards

Acknowledgements

No external funding agencies were involved, and the study did not require collaboration with any specific institutions involving human participants.

Disclosure of Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript. No financial or personal relationships with any entities are linked to the study's outcome. The research presented here does not mention any specific commercial products, nor is there any association with competing interests.

Statement of Ethical Approval

This research was conducted in compliance with the ethical standards governing data privacy and responsible AI use. The study followed best practices to ensure the ethical collection, handling, and processing of data. All user interactions and communication patterns collected for model training were anonymized and securely stored to uphold user privacy and adhere to data protection guidelines.

The present research work does not contain any studies performed on animals or human subjects by any of the authors. The focus of the study is on the development and testing of a machine learning framework for predictive AAC systems, which involved only simulated or pre-existing datasets and did not require ethical clearance for human or animal research.

Statement of Informed Consent

This study did not involve any human participants, case studies, surveys, or interviews. Therefore, informed consent was not required. All data used were obtained from pre-existing, anonymized datasets or simulated sources for model training and testing.

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Authors short biography

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An experienced researcher with an MSc in Information Technology, specializing in areas such as Machine Learning, Computer Vision, and Artificial Intelligence. His research interests lie in leveraging AI to develop assistive communication technologies, particularly augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) systems that enhance accessibility. With a strong background in Educational Technology and over five years of research experience, Omotayo is dedicated to creating innovative, user-centered solutions that improve the quality of life for individuals with communication disabilities.