

Exploring LLM-Based Assessment of Italian Middle School Writing: A Pilot Study

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Abstract

This study investigates the use of ChatGPT for Automated Essay Scoring (AES) in assessing Italian middle school students’ written texts. Using rubrics targeting grammar, coherence and argumentation, we compare AI-generated feedback with that of a human teacher on a newly collected corpus of students’ essays. Despite some differences, ChatGPT provided detailed and timely feedback that complements the teacher’s role. These findings underscore the potential of generative AI to improve the assessment of writing, providing useful insights for educators and supporting students in developing their writing skills.

1 Introduction and Background

Advances in Natural Language Processing (NLP) and Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) have enabled platforms like ChatGPT to generate human language with notable accuracy, making them valuable tools and stimulating growing interest among educators and researchers. However, integrating GenAI into education has elicited mixed reactions. Some educators, particularly those less familiar with such tools, express concerns about misinformation and the potential devaluation of teachers’ roles. Others emphasize AI’s potential, especially in addressing diverse educational needs. Studies such as [Law \(2024\)](#) and [Kaplan-Rakowski et al. \(2023\)](#) highlight AI’s role in personalized learning, notably in multicultural settings, by adapting to varied learning styles and reflecting educators’ increasing openness to experimentation.

Within this evolving landscape, [Steele \(2023\)](#) calls for a balanced approach, stressing that while misuse is possible, the educational value of GenAI depends on thoughtful implementation. When effectively integrated, AI benefits both students and teachers. It offers students immediate, personalized feedback on written work, improving grammar, coherence and overall writing skills. For teachers,

it reduces the burden of time-intensive tasks like grading and enables data-informed instruction by revealing student performance patterns.

This study investigates the use of generative AI for automated essay scoring (AES)—a long-established area of research in education, traditionally supported by NLP-based approaches ([Shermis and Burstein, 2013](#); [Uto et al., 2020](#); [Wu et al., 2022](#); [Higgins et al., 2004](#)), and more recently revisited through the lens of large language models. Specifically, we assess how ChatGPT’s functionalities align with the one-to-one tutoring model proposed by [Bloom \(1984\)](#)—which emphasizes personalized, formative support to enhance learning outcomes—and we examine its ability to provide fine-grained evaluations of student writing that align with those of human teachers. Our study builds on current research, particularly [Mizumoto and Eguchi \(2023\)](#) and [Naisimith et al. \(2023\)](#). The former, focused on AES for English as a second language (L2), demonstrated that GPT-3 can approximate expert ratings across multiple dimensions of writing—such as cohesion, lexical richness, and grammatical accuracy—while also showing that performance improves when explicit, multi-level linguistic features are incorporated. The latter showed that GPT-4 can effectively analyze the logical flow of ideas in a text, offering a robust evaluation of discourse coherence. The study by [Yavuz et al. \(2024\)](#) further demonstrated that, when guided by a detailed five-domain rubric and modest prompt adjustments, LLMs like ChatGPT achieve high agreement with experienced human raters, particularly on objective criteria (grammar, mechanics) but with some divergence on more interpretive domains (content, organization).

While previous studies have primarily focused on English language learners, our work represents, to our knowledge, one of the first attempts to apply these methodologies to middle school students writing in Italian as a first language.

Contributions This paper offers three main contributions: i) a new Italian language corpus of authentic argumentative essays written by middle school students¹; ii) initial evidence that LLMs can produce evaluations comparable to a teacher's, particularly when guided by rubrics, within this specific educational context; iii) a fine-grained look at the alignment between human and AI-generated criteria.

2 Methodology

The study involved 17 middle school students, both native and non-native Italian speakers. A preliminary questionnaire, adapted from the INVALSI² model, collected data on students' language habits. Results showed that over half of the participants, although born in Italy, spoke Italian as an L2. Before the writing task, students and their Italian teacher were introduced to ChatGPT to familiarize themselves with its functionalities and make the experience more engaging. For this exploratory investigation, we selected OpenAI's ChatGPT—specifically the free-tier GPT-4 version—due to its widespread accessibility and popularity, even among non-expert users. Notably, the version used was not fine-tuned for educational or assessment-specific tasks.

As part of their regular curriculum, students were then introduced to argumentative writing. Once prepared, each student composed two short argumentative texts, as detailed in Section 2.1. The teacher subsequently developed an evaluation rubric, which was used by both herself and the model. Additionally, ChatGPT was prompted to generate its own rubric, enabling a comparative analysis between the model's and the teacher's feedback (Section 2.2).

2.1 Dataset

The corpus consisted of 34 argumentative texts, evenly divided into two groups (A and B). **Group A** included open-topic texts, where students independently chose a theme to explore. **Group B** included responses to assigned prompts on current social issues, such as the influence of social media personalities or the decline in teenage reading

habits. In both cases, students were required to take a position and support it using provided materials³. Texts were collected, anonymized and digitized using Google Docs' voice recognition and transcription tools, then carefully reviewed and corrected while deliberately preserving any typos or non-standard language produced by the students.⁴

Linguistic analysis To better understand the composition of the corpus, all texts were analyzed through Profiling-UD (Brunato et al., 2020), a web-based application designed to provide the linguistic profile of a text for multiple languages. The tool is based on the Universal Dependencies (UD) framework (De Marneffe et al., 2021) and allows to extract a large set of features spanning across raw, lexical and morpho-syntactic level.

For each text, we also computed the Gulpease Index (Lucisano and Piemontese, 1988), a basic readability metric specific to Italian combining sentence and word length into a score from 0 (low readability) to 100 (high readability)⁵.

As shown in Table 1, Group A produced longer texts in terms of tokens, as well as with more sentences and longer average sentences—suggesting greater fluency and engagement. Group B's texts were shorter but featured slightly longer words and a higher Type Token Ratio, possibly due to more formal or technical vocabulary, consistent with the nature of the assigned prompts.

Gulpease Index scores were similar across groups, though Group B exhibited a slightly greater standard deviation, possibly reflecting varied responses to the prompt—ranging from simplification to more complex lexical or syntactic strategies.

2.2 Rubrics

The evaluation rubric shown in Table 2 was developed by the teacher, drawing on Vignola (2021) and the assessment criteria established by the Italian Ministry of Education for this school level.

Five criteria were identified, covering orthographic, grammatical, syntactic and content-related aspects. These assess the student's ability to present ideas clearly, support them with appropriate evidence and structure arguments coherently

¹The corpus will be made freely available at <http://www.italianlp.it/resources/>

²The INVALSI (National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education System) is a public research organization responsible for evaluating students' knowledge and skills, the quality of educational programs and supporting school assessments in Italy.

³Synthesized versions of the prompts are available in Appendix A.

⁴This tool was used exclusively to speed up manual transcription. No student voice recordings were used and the tool does not play a relevant role in the analysis.

⁵The Gulpease Index expresses the readability score as a percentage, based on standardized value ranges.

Feature	Group A		Group B	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Number of Tokens	625.18	338.33	470.71	164.36
Number of Sentences	27.24	16.66	25.24	12.31
Avg Sentence Length	25.63	8.61	20.84	6.62
Avg Word Length (in characters)	4.70	0.22	4.89	0.31
Lexical Density*	0.49	0.02	0.51	0.02
Type-Token Ratio*	0.71	0.05	0.75	0.05
% Present Tense Verb*	59.51	11.11	77.64	10.80
% Past Tense Verb*	34.87	10.21	20.25	9.69
Avg Link Length	2.76	0.38	2.70	0.33
Gulpease Index	54.81	4.28	55.84	5.15

Table 1: Mean and standard deviation (SD) for a subset of linguistic features in Group A and Group B. Features with a significant statistical difference according to the Mann Whitney U Test ($p < 0.05$) are marked with *.

Criterion	A (2)	I (1)	B (0.5)
Focus	Clear	Key points	Some points
Support	3+ refs.	2 refs.	1 ref.
Accuracy	Logical	Minor Flaws	Inconsistent
Grammar	No errors	Minor errors	Distracting
Tech.Terms	Consistent	Frequent	Partial

Table 2: Teacher Evaluation Rubric for Argumentative Texts. A = Advanced, I = Intermediate, B = Basic. A score of 0 indicates no competence.

and accurately. Specifically, **support** refers to the quantity and relevance of examples or factual evidence used to substantiate claims, while **accuracy** evaluates the logical consistency of the argument, regardless of the number of references cited.

Each category is scored from 0 to 2, corresponding to four competence levels: Beginner, Basic, Intermediate and Advanced. The teacher applied this rubric to both sets of texts, assigning a final score based on the average across all categories.

In response to a dedicated prompt (see Section 2.3), ChatGPT generated its own rubric, outlined in Table 3, identifying five evaluation categories. It was then instructed to align its scoring system with that of the teacher. Although not identical, the two rubrics focus on similar core aspects. Notably, ChatGPT introduced parameters such as **emotional impact** and **persuasion**, which are often absent from traditional assessment frameworks.

2.3 Prompt configurations

To evaluate the consistency between ChatGPT’s and the teacher’s assessments, the three structured prompts reported in Table 4 were designed:

1. The first asked the model to provide an overall assessment of the texts without referencing specific criteria;
2. The second required the model to evaluate based

Criterion	Description
Clarity	Fluent, structured (A); Clear, minor gaps (I); Inconsistent, unclear (B)
Argumentation	Strong, supported (A); Good, missing details (I); Weak development (B)
Originality	Highly original (A); Good, developed (I); Limited, superficial (B)
Style	Precise, context-appropriate (A); Clear, minor errors (I); Simple, some errors (B)
Impact	Engaging, persuasive (A); Good, partially engaging (I); Limited impact (B)

Table 3: ChatGPT’s Evaluation Rubric for Argumentative Texts. A = Advanced, I = Intermediate, B = Basic. A score of 0 indicates no competence.

on its self-generated rubric (Table 3);

3. The third instructed the model to use the teacher’s rubric for assessment (Table 2).

3 Results and Discussion

To ensure maximum accuracy in comparing the two sets of feedback, Pearson and Spearman correlation coefficients were employed.

Table 5 summarizes the correlations between teacher and ChatGPT scores across the three prompt conditions, for both Group A (open-topic texts) and Group B (prompted texts).

Group	Prompt	Pearson / Spearman
Group A	Prompt 1	0.6948 / 0.6967
	Prompt 2	0.6217 / 0.5839
	Prompt 3	0.7319 / 0.7089
Group B	Prompt 1	0.1096 / 0.2040
	Prompt 2	0.4978 / 0.6317
	Prompt 3	0.5918 / 0.7267

Table 5: Correlation coefficients between teacher and ChatGPT evaluations for each prompt.

As shown in Table 5, Prompt 3—where the model used the teacher’s rubric—yielded the highest agreement with human evaluations, particularly for Group A. This suggests that rubric alignment is a key factor in achieving consistency between human and AI assessments. To gain a more granular understanding of this alignment, we analyzed the correlations for each individual criterion in the teacher’s rubric under the third prompt condition. These results are presented in Table 6.

It can be seen that ChatGPT’s evaluations most closely align with the teacher’s when assessing higher-order dimensions such as content accuracy and argumentative support. In contrast, lower cor-

First	Assign a score to each of the argumentative texts I will provide as input. There are 17 texts in total, all argumentative essays written in response to a given prompt. You will be given the document containing the prompts from which students were free to choose. You may assign a score from 0 to 10, where 0 corresponds to the lowest possible score and 10 to the highest. The score should reflect an overall judgment. You will not be asked to justify the score assigned.
Second	Assign a score to each of the argumentative texts I will provide as input. There are 17 texts in total, all argumentative essays written in response to a given prompt. You will be given the document containing the prompts from which students were free to choose. You may assign a score from 0 to 10, where 0 corresponds to the lowest possible score and 10 to the highest. The score should be based on the evaluation rubric that you provide. You will not be asked to justify the score assigned.
Third	Assign a score to each of the argumentative texts I will provide as input. There are 17 texts in total, all argumentative essays written in response to a given prompt. You will be given the document containing the prompts from which students were free to choose. You may assign a score from 0 to 10, where 0 corresponds to the lowest possible score and 10 to the highest. The score should be based on the evaluation rubric I will provide. You will not be asked to justify the assigned scores.

Table 4: Prompt formulations for each scenario.

Criterion	Group A		Group B	
	Pearson	Spearman	Pearson	Spearman
Focus	0.5992	0.5818	0.4205	0.4839
Support	0.5090	0.5153	0.6765	0.7002
Accuracy	0.6993	0.6987	0.4956	0.4948
Grammar	0.3440	0.2692	0.3776	0.3780
TechTerms	0.6271	0.6318	0.650	0.5024

Table 6: Correlation coefficients between teacher and ChatGPT evaluation for specific criteria (Prompt 3).

relations were observed for surface-level features like spelling and grammar, especially in Group B. This indicates that while the model captures content-related aspects relatively well, it may be less reliable for assessing language correctness in L2 contexts. A possible explanation lies in the model’s tendency to prioritize semantic coherence over formal accuracy: grammar and orthographic errors that do not significantly affect overall meaning are often overlooked or downplayed.

Preliminary insights from our qualitative analysis support this interpretation. In particular, typical L2 learner errors—such as incorrect verb conjugations, article omission or gender mismatches—tend to be less salient to the model than to a human teacher, who is trained to recognize them as key developmental indicators. This discrepancy is particularly evident in one case where the model praised a student’s text for its clarity and thematic structure, while failing to note multiple morphosyntactic inaccuracies and instances of negative transfer from English. Notably, the expression "non è tutto divertimento e giochi", a literal calque of "it’s not all fun and games" went unremarked. While the teacher identified this as a sign of L1 interference, the model prioritized coherence and reader engagement. The full text is included in Appendix B.

Furthermore, teacher evaluations for both groups reveal a strong polarization within the class, with a clear distinction between high-performing students and those who struggle the most, often receiving insufficient scores. Conversely, ChatGPT tends to avoid particularly severe judgements. Instead, it highlights the positive aspects of the text, often justifying minor errors. This explains the upward variation of approximately two points in many cases compared to the teacher’s scores.

Moreover, the model frequently goes beyond the prompt’s explicit requirements by offering qualitative feedback in addition to numerical scores. Its comments aim to encourage students, as in the following example:

You have presented a thorough and well-structured analysis, examining different perspectives and providing compelling arguments. Your text is clear and well-articulated, though minor syntactic adjustments could improve its overall fluency. Excellent work in delivering a comprehensive view of the issue!

However, this "positive bias" can lead the model to misjudge texts by relying on superficial features, such as formal register and citations, while overlooking the absence of clear argumentative progression and the overuse of abstract formulations. For instance, it may mistake weak arguments, enhanced with technical terminology, for genuinely well-constructed reasoning.

This discrepancy becomes especially apparent when compared to the teacher’s evaluations. Unlike the model, the teacher can draw on subject-specific knowledge and a deeper understanding of students’ academic backgrounds, resulting in more nuanced and context-aware assessments. A concrete example of this dynamic is offered by Essay 2 included in Appendix B.

Nonetheless, the correlation indices indicate a moderate yet meaningful level of agreement between the two evaluators. This highlights both the model's ability to identify major trends and its limitations in fully replicating human judgment.

4 Conclusion

This study has offered promising insights into the use of ChatGPT for Automated Essay Scoring (AES), particularly in a non-English, middle school setting. Despite the absence of fine-tuning or domain-specific adaptation, ChatGPT consistently provided coherent and structured feedback, showing a level of reliability that makes it a viable support tool for formative assessment. This consistency was evident across multiple zero-shot prompts, where the model produced comparable scores and qualitative feedback for the same texts, even with slight changes in prompt phrasing.

To strengthen and extend these initial findings, we are currently expanding the corpus and testing additional generative models, including those natively trained on Italian, to better evaluate the generalizability of the results.

Future research should also explore ways to incorporate students' linguistic and educational backgrounds into the evaluation process. Doing so would enable models to better reflect the holistic perspective of human teachers—one that accounts not only for the final written product, but also for individual learning trajectories and developmental progress. Finally, we believe that examining the impact of automated feedback on students' understanding of their own errors, as well as on teachers' ability to refine their evaluations, will yield valuable insights into how generative models can effectively complement traditional pedagogical practices, supporting both teaching strategies and student learning outcomes.

5 Limitations

This study is exploratory in nature, and its findings are limited by the small dataset, single-school context and use of a general-purpose version of ChatGPT. As such, results should be viewed as provisional and not yet generalizable.

Beyond methodological constraints, we are aware of broader issues with using generative AI in education. The model's feedback can suffer from bias, redundancy and inconsistency, especially when it overemphasizes some aspects (e.g., content

coherence) while overlooking others (e.g., grammatical accuracy). Variability in outputs across identical prompts and occurrences of hallucinations further challenge its reliability.

Ethical concerns also remain. These include risks related to privacy, misinformation, bias (e.g., xenophobia), and misuse of data, as demonstrated by the temporary ban of ChatGPT in Italy in 2023, lifted only after OpenAI introduced stricter data protection measures.

In line with UNESCO's 2021 Recommendation on the Ethics of AI, we stress that AI should support—not replace—teachers, promoting inclusive, transparent, and ethically responsible learning environments.

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A Assigned Writing Prompts (Group B)

The following is a synthesized version of the original writing tasks:

- **Influencers and social media.** Students were asked to reflect on the role of influencers in shaping opinions and behavior. The prompt encouraged them to take a stance on whether influencers are manipulative figures or authentic role models, and to support their opinion using the sources provided.
- **Reading habits among teenagers.** Students were invited to comment on the decreasing number of young readers in Italy (ages 15–17), based on a report by the national statistics institute (Istat) and a related blog article. They were asked to introduce themselves to a new school community and to share their perspective on the advantages of ebooks versus printed books, referring to the given materials.

B Examples of Discrepant Evaluations

Essay 1

Original	English Translation
<p>Nel mondo online di oggi, gli influencer sono ovunque e danno forma a ciò che le persone acquistano e pensano su piattaforme come Instagram e YouTube. ma cosa si nasconde veramente dietro le loro vite glamour? Certo, gli influencer sembrano avere tutto: viaggi fantasiosi, feste fantastiche e cose gratis. Ma creare post perfetti richiede tantissimo impegno. Trascorrono anni a trovare idee, scattare e modificare foto e video e chattare con i loro follower. La chiave per essere un influencer di successo? costruire una base di fan fedeli. Ciò significa essere reali, riconoscibili e attenersi a uno stile. Ai fan piacciono gli influencer di cui si fidano e con cui sentono una connessione. Quindi, gli influencer devono rimanere onesti, anche quando vengono pagati per promuovere cose. Ma non è tutto divertimento e giochi. I social media sono in continua evoluzione, quindi gli influencer devono stare al passo con la tendenza e gli algoritmi. Ciò significa cambiare continuamente la propria strategia di contenuto ed è estenuante cercare di rimanere al passo. E non dimentichiamo il dramma. Gli influencer vengono denunciati per qualsiasi cosa, dai falsi follower alle sponsorizzazioni losche. Inoltre, si confrontano continuamente con gli altri, il che può farli sentire piuttosto male con se stessi. Ma nonostante le sfide, molti influencer amano ciò che fanno, che stiano lottando per cause importanti, diffondendo la positività corporea o semplicemente condividendo la propria vita, sanno che stanno facendo la differenza. Ci sono così tanti influencer che fanno grandi lavori, ma gli hater lo dicono sempre: "stai copiando gli altri" queste affermazioni li fanno sentire così male e li incoraggiano a realizzare più video e a dare i loro consigli. Quindi, essere un influencer non è solo sfarzo e glam. E' un lavoro duro, con molta pressione per rimanere rilevanti. Ma per coloro che amano connettersi con le persone e fare la differenza, ne vale assolutamente la pena. Non è facile essere un influencer.</p>	<p>In today's online world, influencers are everywhere and shape what people buy and think on platforms like Instagram and YouTube. But what really lies behind their glamorous lives? Sure, influencers seem to have it all: fancy trips, amazing parties, and free stuff. But creating perfect posts takes a lot of effort. They spend years coming up with ideas, taking and editing photos and videos, and chatting with their followers.</p> <p>The key to being a successful influencer? Building a loyal fanbase. This means being real, relatable, and sticking to a consistent style. Fans like influencers they trust and feel a connection with. So, influencers need to stay honest, even when they're paid to promote things.</p> <p>But it's not all fun and games. Social media is constantly evolving, so influencers have to keep up with trends and algorithms. This means constantly changing their content strategy, and it's exhausting trying to stay on top.</p> <p>And let's not forget the drama. Influencers get called out for everything—from fake followers to shady sponsorships. They also constantly compare themselves to others, which can make them feel pretty bad about themselves.</p> <p>But despite the challenges, many influencers love what they do. Whether they're fighting for important causes, spreading body positivity, or simply sharing their lives, they know they're making a difference. There are so many influencers doing great work, but haters always say: "you're copying others." These comments make them feel really bad and push them to make more videos and share their advice.</p> <p>So, being an influencer isn't just glitz and glam. It's hard work, with a lot of pressure to stay relevant. But for those who love connecting with people and making a difference, it's absolutely worth it. It's not easy being an influencer.</p>
<p>Teacher's score: 4.5/10 Lower score due to superficial argumentation and frequent morphosyntactic interference.</p>	
<p>Model's score: 8.5/10 Higher score, highlighting lexical range and coherence while overlooking language transfer issues.</p>	

Essay 2

Original	English Translation
<p>La rivoluzione digitale è pienamente entrata nel nostro patrimonio sociale, culturale e influenza costantemente il nostro stile di vita. Come ogni rivoluzione diviene oggetto di valutazione, sia in senso negativo che in senso positivo, e comunque rimane oggetto di osservazione costante rispetto all'utilizzo che ne fa e alla funzione che ricopre. La rete è certamente un enorme e potente strumento per comunicare ed è in costante evoluzione nelle sue forme utilizzate. Innanzitutto, vale la pena porre l'accento sul significato di "utilizzo", poiché ogni strumento dovrebbe essere considerato come un "mezzo" che viene manovrato dall'uomo e non viceversa. Rainie and Wellman, nella loro analisi sulle tecnologie digitali, compiono una disamina attenta sul cambiamento digitale, ponendo l'attenzione su ciò che le persone fanno con le tecnologie. Malgrado la grande attenzione che viene rivolta ai nuovi gadget, la tecnologia non determina il comportamento umano, sono gli uomini a determinare il modo in cui vengono utilizzate le tecnologie. Di sicuro stiamo assistendo ad una, non consueta, ma singolare modalità di relazione all'interno dei rapporti umani: internet è anche uno strumento di socialità che ha anche assunto una natura "partecipativa" della convivenza sociale. I social network mettono in rapporto il singolo con gruppi sempre più ampi, non solo, ma le relazioni sembrano modificarsi da relazioni stabili e statiche a relazioni rapide, veloci e meno accurate. Pertanto, si tratta di un cambiamento non solo quantitativo, ma anche qualitativo. Gli autori osservano poi come in questa "socialità integrata", le relazioni mutano sperimentando nuove forme in via di evoluzione, ponendo anche l'accento sulla possibilità che esistano maggiori possibilità per ognuno di attivare e arricchire i legami sociali, ma anche allo stesso tempo maggiori responsabilità.</p>	<p>The digital revolution has become an integral part of our social and cultural heritage, and it constantly influences our lifestyle. Like any revolution, it becomes a subject of evaluation—both negatively and positively—and remains under constant observation regarding how it is used and the role it plays. The internet is undoubtedly a vast and powerful tool for communication, and it is constantly evolving in the forms through which it is used. First and foremost, it's worth emphasizing the meaning of "use," since any tool should be seen as a "means" that is operated by humans—not the other way around. Rainie and Wellman, in their analysis of digital technologies, provide a careful examination of digital change, focusing on what people do with technologies. Despite the great attention given to new gadgets, technology does not determine human behavior; rather, it is humans who determine how technologies are used. We are certainly witnessing a way of relating within human relationships that is not conventional, but rather unique: the internet is also a tool for social interaction and has even taken on a "participatory" role in social life. Social networks connect individuals with increasingly large groups, and not only that—the nature of relationships seems to be changing from stable and static bonds to faster, more dynamic, and less accurate ones. Therefore, this is a change that is not only quantitative but also qualitative. The authors also note that in this "integrated sociality," relationships are evolving and experimenting with new forms, while also highlighting the increased opportunities for individuals to initiate and enrich social ties—along with, at the same time, greater responsibilities.</p>
<p>Teacher's score: 2.5/10 Lower score, pointing out the vagueness of the argument and lack of critical positioning.</p>	
<p>Model's score: 7.5/10 High score due to advanced vocabulary and academic references.</p>	