Automatic Test Case Generation: What if Test Code Quality Matters?

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ABSTRACT

Test case generation tools that optimize code coverage have been extensively investigated. Recently, researchers have suggested to add other non-coverage criteria, such as memory consumption or readability, to increase the practical usefulness of generated tests. In this paper, we observe that test code quality metrics, and test cohesion and coupling in particular, are valuable candidates as additional criteria. Indeed, tests with low cohesion and/or high coupling have been shown to have a negative impact on future maintenance activities. In an exploratory investigation we show that most generated tests are indeed affected by poor test code quality. For this reason, we incorporate cohesion and coupling metrics into the main loop of search-based algorithm for test case generation. Through an empirical study we show that our approach is not only able to generate tests that are more cohesive and less coupled, but can (i) increase branch coverage up to 10% when enough time is given to the search and (ii) result in statistically shorter tests.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

D.2.5 [Software Engineering: Testing and Debugging]:

Keywords

Evolutionary testing, many-objective optimization, branch coverage, test code quality

1. INTRODUCTION

Automated test case generation tools have been widely studied in literature in order to reduce the cost of software testing. Generating unit tests via automated techniques helps developers to maximize the percentage of code elements (e.g., statements) being exercised according to well-established code coverage criteria [41]. Previous studies acknowledged additional important benefits, including but not limited to triggering undeclared exceptions and failures [21], or achieving debugging effectiveness comparable to manually written tests [11, 36]. However, conventional approaches to test case generation mainly focus on code coverage as a unique goal to achieve, without taking into account other factors that can be relevant for testers. For example, Afshan et al. [2] highlighted that one such factor is the effort needed to manually check test data input and test results (e.g., assertions) in order to assess whether the software behaves as intended. Therefore, they have incorporated language models into the data generation process with the aim of generating natural language like input strings to improve human readability. Recently, Daka et al. [14] used a post-processing technique to optimize readability by mutating generated tests leveraging a domain-specific model of unit test readability based on human judgement. Other non-coverage-based criteria exploited in literature for test case generation include execution time [17, 37], memory consumption [25], test size [19, 31, 35], and ability to reveal faults [37].

In this paper, we focus on test code quality metrics to consider in addition to code coverage. Poorly designed tests are known to have a negative impact on test maintenance, as they are more difficult to adjust when production code changes [7, 30, 47, 33]. Automated tests first need to be maintained when they are generated, since testers need to manually validate each test case to check the assertions (oracle cost) [2, 9]. In addition, tests also need to be maintained and eventually updated according to the changes performed in the production code during later development activities. Therefore, we argue that achieving easily maintainable tests is a desirable and important goal in test case generation.

The related literature provides a plethora of metrics to detect poorly designed tests, such as rules for test smells detection [22, 43, 44]. In the context of this paper, we consider two simple, yet critical quality metrics for evaluating test code maintainability, namely test cohesion and test coupling. According to Meszaros [29], maintainable tests must be as simple (cohesive) as possible, i.e., each test should not verify too much functionality at the same time to avoid test obfuscation. Furthermore, test overlap (or test coupling) should be minimized so that only few tests are affected by any future change [29], improving test readability and simplifying future maintenance activities.

For measuring test cohesion and test coupling we rely on Information Retrieval (IR) methods, similarly to previous papers for assessing the quality of production code [26, 39, 42]. Specifically, we define two novel metrics, namely Coupling Between Test Methods (CBTM) and Lack of Cohesion...
of a Test Method (LCTM) inspired by conceptual coupling and conceptual cohesion, which are two well-known metrics to assess code quality [42].

We choose IR methods since previous studies [26, 39, 42] demonstrated how textual analysis often outperforms structural metrics in its ability to describe cohesion and coupling phenomena.

To evaluate to what extent automatically generated test cases present design problems, we conducted a large scale preliminary study on the SF110 dataset [20] and using Evosuite [19] as test case generation tool. This analysis revealed that most automatically generated tests suffer from high coupling with other tests in the same test suite. Moreover, up to 28% of test cases (test methods in JUnit) suffer from low cohesion.

Given the results of this exploratory analysis, we propose to incorporate our quality metrics LCTM and CBTM into the main loop of Evosuite to guide the search toward more cohesive and less coupled tests. For this, we extended the MOSA algorithm, a novel many-objective genetic algorithm recently proposed by Panichella et al. [35], by incorporating our quality metrics within the selection mechanism. To evaluate our quality-based variant of MOSA, we conducted a second empirical study on 43 randomly sampled classes from the SF110 dataset. The results indicate that, besides improving both LCTM and CBTM scores with respect to the original MOSA and Evosuite’s default search strategy (Whole Suite), our quality-based MOSA approach leads to other valuable positive effects: (i) when giving more time to the search, incorporating test code quality metrics may reduce the probability of early convergence increasing the final branch coverage; and (ii) the generated tests tend to be shorter, suggesting the possibility to complement existing post-search minimization strategies.

2. COMPUTING TEST CODE QUALITY METRICS

Designing test code for maintainability is a key principle of Test Driven Development (TDD) [10]. Specifically, writing highly cohesive and weakly coupled test cases ensures that each test method provides a specific responsibility, making it easily understandable and maintainable [10]. Even if in the context of automatic unit test generation the problem of maintainability could be relaxed (test cases can be regenerated when something changes in production code), it is still important to remark that automated tests need to be maintained once they are generated, since testers must manually validate each test case to check the assertions [9]. Moreover, as indicated by a Rojas et al. [40], automatically generated tests are not immediately used but they are refined by testers in order to (i) modify/remove generated test code, (ii) add new tests when automated tools leave uncovered branches and (iii) combine generated with manual written tests [40].

It is worth noting that in this paper we look for coupling among test methods (representing single test cases in the JUnit framework) of the same JUnit class (i.e., a test suite in JUnit). Unlike other strategies for computing coupling (e.g., looking for coupling between test and production code [7]), our goal is to measure to what extent a test method has relationships with the other test methods of the same class, in order to evaluate the quality of the decomposition of the methods in the JUnit class. To compute the quality of test methods, in this paper we define two metrics exploiting textual information, able to measure the degree of cohesion and coupling of a test method. It is worth noting that, as pointed out in previous work (e.g., [39, 42]), textual analysis can be successfully used for measuring source code quality. Moreover, textual analysis often outperforms structural metrics in its ability to describe the phenomenon [26, 39, 42]. In the following subsections, we report the process we follow to compute these metrics.

2.1 Textual Information Extraction and Processing

Starting from the set of test artifacts composing the software project under analysis, during the first step we extract the textual content characterizing each test method by selecting only the textual elements actually needed for the textual analysis process, i.e., source code identifiers and comments.

The textual elements are then normalized by using a typical Information Retrieval (IR) normalization process. Thus, the terms contained in the source code are transformed by applying the following steps [8]: (i) separating composite identifiers using camel case splitting, which splits words based on underscores, capital letters and numerical digits; (ii) putting extracted words in lower case; (iii) removing special characters, programming keywords and common English stop words; and (iv) stemming words to their original roots via Porter’s stemmer [38].

Finally, the normalized words are weighted using the term frequency - inverse document frequency (tf-idf) schema [8], which reduces the relevance of too generic words that are contained in most source components. Therefore, the resulting textual content is individually analyzed in order to apply cohesion and coupling metrics. To compute them, we rely on Latent Semantic Indexing (LSI) [16], namely an extension of the Vector Space Model (VSM) [8], which models code components as vectors of terms occurring in a given software system. LSI uses Singular Value Decomposition (SVD) [13] to cluster code components according to the relationships among words and among code components (co-occurrences). Then, the original vectors (code components) are projected into a reduced k space of concepts to limit the effect of textual noise. For the choice of size of the reduced space (k) we used the heuristic proposed by Kuhn et al. [24] that provided good results in many software engineering applications, i.e., k = (m × n)^0.2 where m denotes the vocabulary size and n denotes the number of documents (code components in our case). Finally, the textual similarity among software components is measured as the cosine of the angle between the corresponding vectors.

2.2 Computing Test Method Coupling

To measure the degree of coupling of a test method, our conjecture is that methods having high coupling have high textual similarity with the other methods contained in the test suite. Following this conjecture, we compute the coupling metric by applying the average of the textual similarity between the test method under analysis and the other test methods contained in the JUnit test class. Formally, let t_o be the test method under analysis and let T = {t_1, . . . , t_n} be the set of the test methods contained in the test suite, we compute the Coupling Between Test Methods (CBTM)
as follows:

\[ \text{CBTM}(t_a) = \text{mean} \left( \sum_{k=0}^{n} \text{sim}(t_a, t_k), t_a \neq t_k \right) \] (1)

where \( n \) is the number of test methods in \( T \) (excluding \( t_a \)), and \( \text{sim}(t_a, t_k) \) denotes the cosine similarity between \( t_a \) and the test method under analysis, and another test method \( t_k \) in \( T \). The resulting value of \( \text{CBTM}(t_a) \in [0, 1] \). The higher the \( \text{CBTM}(t_a) \), the higher the coupling between \( t_a \) and the other test methods in the JUnit test class.

2.3 Computing Test Method Cohesion

When computing test method cohesion, our conjecture is that methods having low cohesion are characterized by low textual similarity among the tested methods. It is important to note that test methods generally have few lines of code, and therefore have a limited number of terms for setting up a similarity technique. This is the reason why we firstly expand the test method calls with the actual source code called by the test method, and then we start the textual-based computation.

More formally, let \( t = \{c_1, \ldots, c_n\} \) be the JUnit test method under analysis where \( c_i \) is the \( i \)-th method call in \( t \). We first modify the test method by replacing all its method calls with the corresponding body of the called production methods. Note that in this operation we only replace the test method calls with the source code of the corresponding production method, without replacing the calls done by the production method, i.e., we do not recursively replace all the method calls. Formally, the modified test method is \( t' = \{c'_1, \ldots, c'_n\} \) where the generic method call \( c_i \) is replaced by the corresponding production code body \( c'_i \). Starting from \( t' \) we compute the Lack of Cohesion of a Test Method (LCTM) as the average similarity between its constituent methods \( c'_i \) as follows:

\[ \text{LCTM}(t) = 1 - \text{mean} \left( \frac{\text{sim}(c'_i, c'_j)}{n} \right) \] (2)

where \( n \) is the number of method calls in \( t \), and \( \text{sim}(c'_i, c'_j) \) denotes the cosine similarity between two modified method calls \( c'_i \) and \( c'_j \) in \( t' \). Based on the above definition, LCTM\((t)\) \( \in [0, 1] \). If a test method is cohesive, then the LCTM\((t)\) is close to zero.

3. Investigating the Quality of Automatically Generated Tests

The goal of this study is to apply the previously defined coupling and cohesion test code metrics in order to investigate the quality of JUnit classes automatically generated using EvoSuite [18]. Thus, we formulate the following RQ:

**RQ0:** To what extent do automatically generated test cases present design problems?

Specifically, we aim at analyzing to what extent design problems affect automatically generated test cases. The purpose is to investigate possible gains (if any) from the application of quality metrics in the context of automatic test case generation.

3.1 Experimental Procedure

The context of this study is SF110, the open dataset\(^1\) produced by Fraser and Arcuri [20], which contains 110 open source projects from SourceForge\(^2\), for a total of 23,886 testable classes. We choose to analyze this dataset, and therefore the behavior of the EvoSuite tool, because of the need to have a dataset able to generalize the results of our study. Table 1 provides a summary of the statistics of the SF110 dataset. To address RQ0, we developed a tool implementing the quality metrics described in Section 2. More precisely, our tool mines the source code of each project in order to extract EvoSuite’s automatically generated JUnit classes. It is worth noting that the SF110 dataset already contains, for each project, a set of automatically generated test suites. Thus, we did not need to run EvoSuite, but we rely on the test classes present in the dataset, taking them as representative of the quality of test code produced by EvoSuite. Then, we analyzed all the test methods contained in the extracted JUnit classes in order to assign to each of them a value of cohesion and coupling. The output of the tool consists of two distributions: the first one concerning a coupling value for each test method, the second one having a cohesion value for each test method. The analysis of the results has been done by discussing the descriptive statistics of such distributions.

3.2 Analysis of the Results

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|l|}
\hline
Characteristic & Value \\
\hline
Number of Projects & 110 \\
Number of Testable Classes & 23,886 \\
Lines of Code & 6,628,619 \\
Number of Java Files & 27,997 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{RQ0: Characteristics of the SF110 dataset}
\end{table}

Listing 1: Example of test method with low cohesion.

\begin{verbatim}
public void test12 () throws Throwable {
    JSTerm jSTerm0 = new JSTerm () ;
    jSTerm0 . makeVariable () ;
    jSTerm0 . add (( Object ) ) ;
    jSTerm0 . matches ( jSTerm0 ) ;
    assertEquals ( false , jSTerm0 . isGround () ) ;
    assertEquals ( true , jSTerm0 . isVariable () ) ;
}
\end{verbatim}

\(^1\)http://www.evosuite.org/experimental-data/sf110/

\(^2\)http://sourceforge.net
Figure 1 shows the distributions of the two quality metrics defined in Section 2 over the test methods in our dataset. Moreover, the red dots represent the mean values of such distributions. Analyzing the CBTM distribution, we observed that, over the total of 83,408 test methods, the median value is 0.67, i.e., half of the test methods (i.e., 41,704) have a high value for CBTM and thus likely have high coupling. This result highlights how most of the test methods suffer from high coupling with the other methods of a test suite. On average, a test method has a value of coupling of 0.55. On the other hand, it is interesting to notice how the results for the cohesion distribution are completely different compared to the coupling one. In this case, we found that most of the test methods are in fact cohesive. This is not unexpected, as EvoSuite applies a minimization process to the generated test methods, i.e., it minimizes the number of statements of the test method by removing the statements that do not contribute to the coverage of the method under test [23]. However, even with this minimization process in place, there are 23,188 out of the total 83,408 (i.e., 28%) test methods having a lack of cohesion higher than 0.35. As an example, Listing 1 presents a JUnit test method from the JSTermEvoSuiteTest class originating from the Shop project. We can observe that the test method checks the return value of two different methods of the production code, i.e., isGround and isVariable. This method has a value of LCTM of 0.83, clearly indicating the lack of cohesion of the test case.

In Summary. From the results achieved after the analysis of the quality metrics on the SF110 dataset, we can conclude that even though measures have been taken to keep test code quality under control during the process of automatic test case generation (e.g., the minimization process), the design of the automatically generated test cases can still be improved in terms of coupling and cohesion.

4. PUTTING QUALITY METRICS INTO THE LOOP

Results from our preliminary study revealed that automatically generated tests can be affected by high coupling as well as by low cohesion. Therefore, we would like to investigate whether incorporating quality metrics in the main loop of an evolutionary unit test generation tool will guide the search toward better tests, i.e., test with lower coupling and higher cohesion. Given the nature of evolutionary search algorithms used in test data generation tools, one theoretically simple strategy would be to consider both cohesion, and coupling as further objectives to consider in addition to code coverage which is the traditional main objective, within a multi-objective paradigm. This apparently simple strategy lead to the usage of Pareto efficient algorithms, such as NSGA-II, which by definition generate optimal trade-offs between cohesion, coupling and code coverage. However, working with such trade-offs is not particular useful for practitioners: imagine tests that have high cohesion and low coupling, but that do not exercise/test any additional code element (e.g., branch) compared to previously executed tests. Moreover, previous work that applies multi-objective approaches to combine code coverage (traditional objective) with non-coverage based objectives have reported a detrimental effect on the final code coverage [17, 25, 32, 37]. For example, Ferrer et al. [17] combined two conflicting goals, i.e., the coverage (to maximize) and the oracle cost (to minimize), using several multi-objective algorithms, including NSGA-II [15] and SPEA2 [48]. Results of their empirical study reported lower coverage scores for multi-objective algorithms if compared to algorithms focused on coverage only [17]. In our case, test code quality metrics can be considered only as secondary objectives if compared to code coverage. Indeed, two test cases can be compared in terms of cohesion and coupling if and only if they cover the same code elements, such as statements or branches. Vice versa, if two tests cover and exercise two different portions of code, they should be incomparable in terms of test code quality (i.e., cohesion and coupling) because preferring one test over the other one will lead to a decrease in code coverage.

Another important aspect to deal with is the proper encoding schema to use. The default situation in EvoSuite is that a chromosome (individual) is a test suite composed of a number of test cases, where each test is a random sequence of statements (e.g., method calls). Thus, individuals have a variable number of test cases with a variable number of statements each. Suites are, then, evolved using genetic algorithms (GAs) targeted at maximizing a code coverage metric, e.g., branch coverage. However, in such encoding schema GAs select, evaluate and evolve test suites while our quality metrics (CBTM, and LCTM) are designed to detect cohesion and coupling issues at the test case level. Evaluating cohesion and coupling at the test suite level is not so trivial: it implies aggregating CBTM and LCTM scores of all test cases in each test suite. Using such an aggregation, test cases with good levels of cohesion (low LCTM) but contained in a test suite with an average to bad level of cohesion (high LCTM) may be not selected. Finally, coupling (i.e., CBTM) may vary when tests are inserted into different test suites: a test case may be highly coupled with test cases within a given test suite, while the same test case may have a low coupling if inserted in a different suite.

For the reasons reported above, we incorporate our test code quality metrics into MOSA (Many-Objective Sorting Algorithm) [35], a novel many-objective algorithm proposed by Panichella et al. [35] for branch coverage. We selected such an algorithm because (i) it evolves test cases and not suites, making it easier to incorporate CBTM and LCTM; (ii) it targets branch coverage as main goal to maximize plus a secondary non-coverage based metric, i.e., test case size to minimize; (iii) it leads to higher or competitive branch coverage compared to existing search algorithms for test case generation [1, 35]. MOSA targets all branches in the class under test at once, which are considered as distinct and different objectives to be optimized [35]. Each objective measures the closeness of a test case to cover the corresponding uncovered branch b according to the normalized branch distance, and the approach level [28], i.e., the minimum number of control dependencies between the executed traces and the branch. In a nutshell, MOSA starts the search by generating random tests (chromosomes) with variable length and statements. Such tests are then evolved by applying a crossover operator and a mutation operator to generate new tests, as usual in GAs. Selection of tests for either reproduction and survival is based on a novel many-objective sorting algorithm, which extends the notion of dominance and gives

3The quality-based MOSA algorithm is publicly available in our online appendix [34].
higher probability of being selected to those test cases that are closest to at least one of the uncovered branches [35]. In the case of more tests having the same branch distance + approach level scores, MOSA uses a secondary non-coverage based criterion which is the test case size (number of statements) such that the test case with the lowest number of statements is preferred. Finally, the final test suite is built using an archive that keeps track of test cases as soon as they cover yet uncovered branches of the program under test. The archive is updated at the end of each generation by considering both main (branch closeness) and secondary (test size) objectives [35].

In order to incorporate CBTM and LCTM into MOSA, we suggest to replace the secondary objective proposed by Panichella et al., i.e., the test case size, with a new secondary objective which takes into account both cohesion (LCTM) and coupling (CBTM) among test cases within a specific generation. More specifically, let us consider a generic population (set of test cases) $T = \{t_1, \ldots, t_n\}$ generated by MOSA at the end of a given generation. For each test $t_i \in T$ we can compute the corresponding lack of cohesion LCTM($t_i$) as the average textual dissimilarity between its constituent method calls (to minimize) as proposed in Section 2. We can also compute the coupling CBTM($t_i$) for each test $t_i \in T$ as the average textual similarity between $t_i$ and all other test cases $t_j \neq t_i$, $t_j \in T$ in the current population (to minimize). Once we computed LCTM and CBTM for all tests in the current population, we use a sum-aggregation approach to have only one final quality score for each test $t_i$ as follows:

$$\text{quality_score}(t_i) = \alpha \times \text{LCTM}(t_i) + \beta \times \text{CBTM}(t_i)$$

where $\alpha$ and $\beta$ are linear combination coefficients taking values within the interval $[0; 1]$. An optimal quality_score value for $t_i$ would be closer to zero, since it implies that $t_i$ is highly cohesive (low lack of cohesion LCTM) and poorly coupled (low coupling CBTM) to other tests in the same population. Different $\alpha$ and $\beta$ coefficients assign different weights to the constituent metrics. However, in this paper we set $\alpha = 0.5$ and $\beta = 0.5$ in order to give the same importance to LCTM (cohesion) and CBTM (coupling).

Our quality_score is incorporated into MOSA by replacing the original secondary criterion (i.e., test case size). Therefore, at the end of each generation MOSA still uses the preference criterion to increase the selection pressure by giving higher priority to those tests that are closer to cover at least one of the uncovered branches (closeness based on the approach level and branch distance). However, when there are multiple test cases equally close to cover an uncovered branch $b_i$, among them we select the one with the lowest quality_score. Finally, we also modify the procedure to update the archive using the algorithm reported for completeness in Algorithm 1. The archive is the data structure used to store test cases as soon as they cover yet uncovered branches. In [35] the archive is updated at the end of each generation to keep track of new tests (covering previously uncovered branches) and again using the test case size as secondary criterion. In our case, when updating the archive, we re-compute the quality_score but this time computing the CBTM metric (coupling) with respect to all tests stored in the archive (line 10 in Algorithm 1). Indeed, when updating the archive new additional tests may worsen then overall coupling among tests in the archive, which is the final test suite. Therefore, Algorithm 1 selects among the set of all test covering a specific branch $b_i$ the one presenting the best internal cohesion (LCTM) and with the lowest coupling (CBTM) with the whole archive.

5. STUDY II: EMPIRICAL EVALUATION

In this section we describe an empirical study aimed at evaluating the effect of cohesion and coupling on the performance of search algorithms for test case generation. In particular, our second study is steered by the following research questions:

RQ1: Does quality optimization produce more cohesive and less coupled tests?

RQ2: Does quality optimization affect the achieved branch coverage?

RQ3: Does quality optimization affect the size of produced tests?

The usage of coupling and cohesion metrics as part of the selection procedure in search algorithms is expected to improve cohesion and coupling of the produced tests. However, with RQ1 we want to verify whether this is true and whether such (eventual) improvements are statistically significant. One potential drawback of combining coverage criteria with non-coverage criteria is that such combination may have detrimental effects on the final code coverage since part of the search effort is not devoted to maximize coverage. Hence, RQ2 is aimed at verifying whether branch coverage increases or decreases when incorporating cohesion and coupling metrics using our proposed strategy. More cohesive and less coupled tests should imply that they do not contain unnecessary statements, i.e., statements that cover branches already covered by other tests in the final test suite. For this reason, RQ3 addresses whether the usage of quality optimization results in shorter tests if compared to a standard strategy targeting branch coverage only.

5.1 Experimental Procedure

For our second study we randomly selected 43 classes from the SF110 corpus, instead of considering all 23,886 classes.
Table 2: Classes in Our Dataset

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Branches</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
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For each class in our sample we ran EvoSuite using (i) MOSA enriched with our test code quality metrics; (ii) STIC with to test code quality metrics; and (ii) whole suite enriched with our test code quality metrics. Details of the selected classes can be found in Table 2. The size of the selected varies randomly. For completeness, the main parameter values used are: (i) the default population size 50 chromosomes; (ii) the single-point crossover with probability 0.75; and (iii) the mutation rate of 1/50. Indeed, at the end of the search process a generated test suite is measured as the sum of the lengths (number of statements) of each composing test case. Note that we analyze the test suite size only for classes where we do not observe a significant improvement in terms of coverage. This is because test suites achieving higher branch coverage are expected to have more test cases (and more statements) than other suites with lower branch coverage for the same class under test.

To address RQ2, we compare branch coverage scores achieved by the three search algorithms. This selection is due to the high number of classes in our sample that we ran EvoSuite using (i) MOSA enriched with our test code quality metrics; (ii) STIC with test code quality metrics; and (ii) whole suite enriched with our test code quality metrics. Details of the selected classes can be found in Table 2. The size of the selected varies randomly. For completeness, the main parameter values used are: (i) the default population size 50 chromosomes; (ii) the single-point crossover with probability 0.75; and (iii) the mutation rate of 1/50. Indeed, at the end of the search process a generated test suite is measured as the sum of the lengths (number of statements) of each composing test case. Note that we analyze the test suite size only for classes where we do not observe a significant improvement in terms of coverage. This is because test suites achieving higher branch coverage are expected to have more test cases (and more statements) than other suites with lower branch coverage for the same class under test.

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Selection function: tournament selection is used with tournament size = 10, which is the default setting in EvoSuite.

5.3 Analysis of the Results

Table 3 reports the results for RQ1. Specifically, the table reports the average quality metric (LCTM + CBTM) obtained over 30 independents runs as well as the results of the Wilcoxon test and the Vargha-Delaney measure. Values $\hat{A}_{12} < 0.5$ indicate that the quality-based MOSA leads to higher cohesion and lower coupling than other algorithms considered in the comparison.

In general, we can notice that tests generated by the quality-based MOSA have better quality metric scores than MOSA alone. One of these three classes (76%) or medium quality (18%). Surprisingly, for three classes the quality-based MOSA obtains (statistically significant) worse scores than MOSA alone. One of these three classes is AdvancedSettings for which the quality-based MOSA produces slightly higher (+0.03) LCTM (lack of cohesion) and CBTM (coupling) when compared to MOSA (see line number 32 in Table 3 — cross-compare with Table 2 to find index). However, we notice that all algorithms quickly reach 100% of branch coverage after a few generations for such a class, which contains only 52 trivial branches (see Table 4 for coverage results). Hence, the quality-based MOSA ended the search after few generations without giving enough time (generations) for optimizing cohesion and coupling.

The comparison with the Whole Suite strategy also reveals positive results for our quality-based algorithm. Indeed, for 32 classes (out of 43) the quality-based MOSA generates tests that are statistically more cohesive and less coupled with respect to those generated by Whole Suite, showing a large effect size in most of cases (78%). For only four classes, Whole Suite produces statistically better results (see lines 11, 18, 32, and 41 in Table 3).

After manual investigation, we found that this happens only for those classes where all search algorithms perform only a few generations, thus, giving limited search time to optimize test quality (as for example for the class AdvancedSettings).

In order to investigate the quality metrics scores of tests generated during the search, Figure 2 depicts the average quality metric scores (i.e., cohesion + coupling) achieved by the three experimented algorithms over time (5 minutes) for the class LovinsStemmer from the weka library. As we can see, the average quality score for our quality-based MOSA is always lower than those achieved by MOSA and Whole Suite.

In particular, the average quality for Whole Suite does not vary over the time, while for MOSA either with or without quality optimization, we observe a general decreasing trend. However, for the quality-based MOSA the overall cohesion+coupling score always remains lower or equal to 1.30 while for MOSA it ranges between 1.55 and 1.30. We obtained consistent results also for all other non-trivial classes in our second empirical study.

For branch coverage (RQ2), the results are reported in Table 4. Specifically, the table reports the average branch coverage ([0,1]) obtained over 30 independents runs as well as the results of the Wilcoxon test and the Vargha-Delaney $\hat{A}_{12}$ effect size. We use S, M, and L to indicate small, medium and large effect sizes respectively. Significantly $p$-values are reported in boldface.

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Figure 2: Cohesion and coupling over time for the class LovinsStemmer with a search budget of five minutes.
This is an important result when compared to previous attempts reported in literature to combine coverage and non-coverage based criteria in test case generation, for which negative effects are reported for the final coverage [17]. From Table 4 we also observe that the quality-based MOSA outperforms Whole Suite in 17 out of 43 cases, inheriting its effectiveness from the standard MOSA algorithm [35]. Finally, no statistically significant difference is observed for other 22 classes.

There are some cases where the Wilcoxon test reveals statistically significant differences, that deserve a more detailed analysis. For five classes in our sample (lines 7, 8, 13, 37, and 42 in Table 4), the usage of quality metrics has a significant positive effect on branch coverage, with an improvement up to 10% for the class Component. To have a better understanding of such effects, Figure 3 depicts the variation of branch coverage achieved by the three algorithms (i.e., MOSA, quality-based MOSA and Whole Suite) over time for the component SimpleNode. To have a broader view, we consider a larger time window of five minutes as search budget. From Figure 3, we can observe that for the first 60 seconds MOSA is particularly effective compared to the other alternatives. However, after the first 90 seconds it is not able to cover any additional branches. On the other hand, the quality-based MOSA is less effective in the first 90 seconds.

We conjecture that this is due to the overhead required for computing cohesion and coupling for tests in each generation. However, after consuming 30% of search budget our quality-based MOSA becomes more effective leading to a final higher branch coverage (+10%) at the end. Hence, the usage of cohesion and quality metrics seems to avoid the premature convergence of MOSA for this particular class: without quality metrics the same algorithm is not able to cover further branches. According to Figure 3, Whole Suite is less effective at reaching high coverage with respect to MOSA (either with or without cohesion and coupling) for most of the search time, confirming the high effectiveness of customized many-objective search in test case generation [35]. However, after 60% of the time simple MOSA and Whole Suite reached the same coverage score and both are not able to cover further branches for the rest of the search budget.

For branch coverage we also observe that there are eight classes (lines 2, 12, 15, 19, 22, 26, 30, and 33 in Table 4) for which cohesion and coupling have a negative effect on MOSA with a coverage decrease ranging between -1% and -4%. One such class is SimpleNode from jmca, for which MOSA achieves 85% branch coverage against 81% for the quality-based MOSA. One possible explanation for this result is that computing quality metrics requires further overhead in addition to the computational complexity of genetic operators, e.g., the computational cost required to compute the textual similarity between tests (chromosomes) in each population. To provide a more in-depth analysis, Figure 4 depicts the branch coverage scores achieved by the three experimented algorithms over time on SimpleNode but using a larger search budget of five minutes instead of 2 minutes used in our original study. We can notice that at the beginning of the search (up to 2 minutes) MOSA is, indeed, faster in reaching higher coverage as also reported in line 12 of Table 4. However, when increasing the search budget to over 2 minutes, MOSA and the quality-based MOSA are indistinguishable. At the end of the search (five minutes) our quality-based MOSA is able to cover more branches leading to an average increase of coverage of +2%. Therefore, the usage of cohesion metrics can help in improving branch coverage by avoiding premature convergence but only when giving more time to the search. On the other hand, when limited search budget is given, not including quality metrics is more effective because it will not increase the overall overhead for each generation. Potentially, better performance may be achieved by developing an adaptive strategy to incorporate
cohesion and quality into MOSA’s main loop according to the
time assigned for the search, e.g., by disabling the com-
putation of our metrics when the search budget is lower than
a specific threshold. This is part of our future agenda.

Finally, Table 5 reports the average test suite size ob-
tained over 30 independents runs (RQ3) as well as the sta-
tistical significance according to the Wilcoxon test and the
Vargha-Delaney measure. In this case, values of \( \hat{A}_{12} < 0.5 \)
indicate that our quality-based MOSA leads to shorter test
suites (with less statements) than other algorithms. Com-
parisons in terms of test suite size are reported only for those
cases where we do not observe a significant improvement in
terms of branch coverage (RQ3). The Wilcoxon test re-
veals that our quality-based MOSA produces significantly
shorter test suites with respect to both MOSA and Whole
Suite. Indeed, in 11 classes out of 30, the test suite gen-
erated by the quality-based MOSA are statistically shorter
then those generated by MOSA, with an average size redu-
tion ranging between 1% and 19%. Vice versa, MOSA pro-
vides test suites significantly shorter than its quality-based
version in only four cases. Similar results are also obtained
from the comparison with the Whole Suite: for ten classes
the generated test suites are statically shorter when using
the quality-based MOSA. These results are quite surprising
if we consider that for all three algorithms —i.e., MOSA,
quality-based MOSA, and Whole Suite— the generated test
suites are post-processed for minimization. Indeed, despite
this minimization, the usage of cohesion and coupling seems
to provide a complementary support toward the generation of
shorter tests likely improving readability.

In Summary. The incorporation of cohesion and cou-
pling into the main loop of test case generation tools help
in improving the overall quality of generated tests, which
are statistically more cohesive and less coupled (RQ4). We
also discover that such quality metrics have positive effects
both on branch coverage and test suite size. Indeed, when
giving more time to the search test quality metrics may re-
duce the probability of early convergence increasing the final
branch coverage (RQ5). Finally, the generated tests tend to
be shorter, suggesting the possibility to complement existing
post-search minimization strategies (RQ6).

6. THREATS TO VALIDITY

This section describes the threats that can affect the va-
idity of our empirical study.

Construct Validity. An important threat related to the
relationship between theory and observation is due to impre-
cisions/errors in the measurements we performed. For
the first study, we defined two software quality metrics based
on textual analysis. Although we are aware that these metrics
might not be the best ones for measuring test code quality,
several previous studies demonstrated, on the one hand,
the usefulness of textual analysis for measuring code quality [39,
42] and, on the other hand, the ability of textual-based tech-
niques to measure code quality with higher accuracy with
respect to structural metrics [26, 39, 42]. However, the anal-
ysis of different quality metrics, including structural ones,
is part of our future agenda. As for the evaluation of the
performances of the GA, we adopted widely used metrics. In-
deed, we used branch coverage and size of the resulting test
suite. In the context of test data generation, such metrics
gave a good measure of the efficiency and the effectiveness of
the test data generation techniques. Finally, for measuring the
post-process quality of the test suites, we used the same
textual metrics defined in Section 2.

Internal Validity. Considering the way the test code
quality metrics are computed, the main threat is represented
by the settings used for the IR process. During the pre-
processing, we filtered the textual corpus by using well known
standard procedures: stop word list, identifiers splitting,
stemmer and the tf-idf weighting schema [8]. As for LSI,
we used the heuristics defined by Kuhn et al. [24] for choos-
ing the number of concepts (k). Regarding the second study,
a potential threat that might affect our results is represented
by the inherent randomness of GA. To limit such threat,
we repeated each execution 30 times. Moreover, another fac-
tor could be represented by the parameters used for setting
up the GA. We are aware that different configurations might

<table>
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<th>Quality-based MOSA vs. Whole Suite</th>
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result in different results, however finding the best configuration is an extremely difficult task. Furthermore, in practice the gains to be made do not always pay off compared to using default configurations widely used in literature [6]. Thus, we rely on a basic setting using default values as suggested in literature.

Conclusion Validity. As for threats related to the relationship between the treatment and the outcome, in the analysis of the results we used appropriate statistical tests coupled with enough repetitions of the experiments to enable the statistical tests. In particular, we used the Wilcoxon test for testing significance in the differences, while the Vargha-Delaney effect size statistic for estimating the magnitude of the observed difference. Moreover, we tried to draw conclusions only when statistically significant results were available.

External Validity. Threats to the external validity regard the generalization of our findings. During the first study, we carried out a large-scale empirical study, involving 110 different software projects in order to evaluate the quality of test cases automatically generated. Instead, our second study involves 43 Java classes from different projects, having different size and different number of branches (ranging between 3 and 7,938). Thus, the selected classes exhibit a reasonable degree of diversity. However, the replication of the study on a larger number of classes is desirable and therefore part of our research agenda.

7. RELATED WORK

Over the last years, the research community has spent a lot of effort on the definition of search based tools aimed at automatically generating test data by targeting branch coverage as the primary goal to achieve [27]. However, researchers have noticed that there are further goals that testers would like to achieve in addition to code coverage, such as memory consumption [25], etc.

Most of approaches in this research thread have considered coverage and non-coverage criteria as equally important objectives to reach and, thus, they have used explicit multi-objective algorithms to optimize them. For example, Ferrer et al. [17] proposed a multi-objective search based algorithm that tries to balance coverage and oracle cost. Specifically, their approach target one branch at time, trying to maximize the coverage and minimize the cost. Pinto and Vergilio [37] also used the single target approach —i.e., targeting only one branch at time— as well as execution time and ability of tests to reveal faults as three distinct objectives to optimize using three-objective search algorithms. Similarly, Oster and Saglietti [31] applied bi-objective optimization for maximizing branch coverage and minimizing the number of test cases. Instead, Lakhota et al. [25] considering dynamic memory consumption as second objective to consider in addition to branch coverage. However, all previous work that applies multi-objective approaches to combine code coverage with non-coverage based objectives reported no effect or even harmful effects on the final code coverage [17].

More recently, Afshan et al. [2] have noticed that readability is a critical non-coverage criteria to take into account since testers are required to manually check test data input and test results (e.g., assertions) in order to assess whether the software behaves as intended. Indeed, unreadable tests imply a substantial increase of human effort involved in manually checking the inputs produced [2]. Therefore, they propose to use natural language models to generate tests with readable string input data that are easy to comprehend for humans.

Daka et al. [14] proposed a post-processing technique to optimize readability by mutating generated tests leveraging a domain-specific model of unit test readability based on human judgement. Other strategies to improve test readability also include the usage of mutation analysis in order to reduce the number of assertions [19].

In this paper, we observe that test code quality is a desirable and important goal in test case generation, since poorly designed tests have been proven to negatively impact future maintenance activities [7, 30, 47, 46]. Specifically, we incorporate two test code quality metrics into the loop of MOSA (Many-Objective Sorting Algorithm) [35], a novel many-objective algorithm that targets all branches in the code at once. As explained in Section 4, we added the quality of test code as secondary non-coverage criterion for selection, instead of the test case size used in the original implementation. Our empirical results show that, unlike previous attempts to combine coverage and non-coverage-criteria into the search loop, code quality metrics have positive effect on code coverage reducing the probability of premature convergence. Furthermore, the generated tests tend to be shorter.

8. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we defined two textual-based test code metrics, i.e., the Coupling Between Test Methods (CBTM) and the Lack of Cohesion of a Test Method (LCTM), able to measure the degree of quality of a test case. In this first study we empirically investigated the quality of test cases automatically generated by EvoSuite on the SF110 dataset, a set of 110 open source projects from SourceForge.

Our findings demonstrate that, even though measures have been taken to keep test code quality under control during the process of automatic test case generation (e.g., minimization), the design of the generated test cases can still be improved. For this reason, we incorporate the defined test code quality metrics into MOSA, a many-objective algorithm for automatic unit test generation [35]. In our approach, we put the quality indicator based on coupling and cohesion metrics as a secondary objective to be optimized by the search based algorithm implemented by MOSA. This contrasts the work of Afshan et al. [3] and Daka et al. [14], who address the problem of test code readability by applying linguistic models as a set of post-processing steps.

In the second study, we randomly selected 43 classes from the SF110 dataset in order to evaluate the benefits provided by the quality-based automatic generation process. First of all, we observed that the generated test cases are statistically more cohesive and less coupled (RQ1). Moreover, the quality-based automatic generation process actually has a positive impact on branch coverage and test suite size (RQ2). Finally, the size of the generated test cases tends to decrease, suggesting that our process can nicely complement existing post-search minimization strategies (RQ3).

Our future work includes the evaluation of the impact of our quality-based algorithm on the effectiveness of test cases, as well as the evaluation of the effects on other maintainability factors, (e.g., readability). Moreover, we plan to assess possible gains (if any) from the application of other test code quality metrics in the automatic test case generation pro-
9. REFERENCES


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