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Original Article

Comparison of Catastrophic Forgetting Mitigation Strategies in Continual Learning Systems

Vanaparthi Kiranmai[1,2], Krishna Reddy Seelam[3], Dr. A. Manikandan[4]

[1]Assistant Professor, Dept of CSE(AIML), Guru Nanak Institutions Technical Campus, Ibrahimpatnam, Hyderabad

[2]Research Scholar, Department of Computer Science and Engineering, Vels Institute of Science, Technology and Advanced, Studies (VISTAS), Pallavaram, Chennai

[3]Assistant Professor, Dept. of CSE, Sree Dattha Institute of Engineering and Science-Hyderabad

[4]Research Supervisor, Associate Professor, Department of Computer Science and Engineering (VISTAS), Vels Institute of Science, Technology and Advanced Studies, Pallavaram. Chennai

Correspondence

Vanaparthi Kiranmai

Assistant Professor, Dept of CSE(AIML), Guru Nanak Institutions Technical Campus, Ibrahimpatnam, Hyderabad

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Abstract

Catastrophic forgetting remains a significant challenge in continual learning systems, where models tend to forget previously learned tasks when exposed to new data. This study conducts a comparative analysis of various mitigation strategies aimed at addressing this issue. We evaluate the effectiveness of regularization-based approaches (Elastic Weight Consolidation and Learning Without Forgetting), replay-based approaches (Experience Replay and Generative Replay), architectural modifications (Progressive Neural Networks and Dynamic Networks), and hybrid methods that combine elements of the aforementioned strategies. Our experiments use standard benchmark datasets and neural network models to assess performance based on accuracy on new tasks, retention of old tasks, and computational cost. Results indicate that while regularization-based methods provide robust retention of past knowledge with moderate resource requirements, replay-based approaches excel in retaining old knowledge at the cost of higher computational demands. Architectural methods offer scalable solutions but with increased complexity and resource usage. Hybrid strategies successfully balance the trade-offs between retention and new task performance, offering practical solutions for mitigating catastrophic forgetting. These findings provide valuable insights for selecting appropriate strategies based on specific application requirements.

Introduction

Catastrophic forgetting, also known as catastrophic interference, is a significant challenge in continual learning systems, where a model is trained sequentially on different tasks. This issue arises when a neural network, after learning a new task, rapidly loses the ability to perform previously learned tasks. Essentially, the model overwrites the weights associated with earlier tasks, leading to a degradation in performance on those tasks. In real-world applications where models need to adapt to new data continuously without retraining from scratch, catastrophic forgetting can severely limit the utility of machine learning systems.

Addressing catastrophic forgetting is crucial for the development of adaptable and lifelong learning systems. For instance, in autonomous driving, a system must learn and adapt to new driving scenarios over time. Without effective mitigation strategies, the system might forget how to handle earlier scenarios, impacting its overall reliability and safety. Similarly, in personalized recommendation systems, continuous learning is necessary to incorporate new user preferences without losing the ability to provide accurate recommendations based on previously learned data. Therefore, developing methods to combat catastrophic forgetting is vital for the robustness and scalability of continual learning systems.

Problem Statement

The problem of catastrophic forgetting in machine learning models refers to the tendency of neural networks to forget previously learned information when trained on new tasks. This problem is particularly pronounced in continual learning scenarios, where models are required to learn and adapt to an evolving set of tasks or data distributions. Traditional neural networks, designed for fixed, static tasks, often lack mechanisms to preserve and integrate past knowledge while acquiring new information. Consequently, as the model encounters new tasks, the performance on previously learned tasks deteriorates, resulting in an unreliable system that fails to retain and build upon its past learning experiences. This issue undermines the effectiveness of neural

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networks in dynamic environments where ongoing learning and adaptation are essential.

Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to systematically compare various mitigation strategies for catastrophic forgetting in continual learning systems. The study aims to evaluate and analyze the effectiveness of different approaches, including regularization-based methods, replay-based methods, architectural modifications, and hybrid strategies. By comparing these strategies, the research seeks to identify which methods are most effective in preserving previously acquired knowledge while allowing the model to adapt to new tasks. Additionally, the study will assess the trade-offs associated with each strategy, such as computational efficiency, ease of implementation, and impact on model performance. Ultimately, the goal is to provide insights and recommendations for selecting and implementing the most suitable mitigation strategies to enhance the performance and reliability of continual learning systems.

Literature Survey

CContinual learning, also known as lifelong learning, refers to the capability of a machine learning model to learn from a continuous stream of data or tasks without forgetting previously acquired knowledge. Unlike traditional machine learning models that are typically trained on a fixed dataset and then deployed, continual learning systems are designed to adapt to new information over time. This approach mimics human learning, where individuals continuously acquire and build upon knowledge throughout their lives. The significance of continual learning lies in its ability to enable systems to handle dynamic environments, adapt to new scenarios, and improve performance based on evolving data. This adaptability is crucial for applications such as autonomous vehicles, personalized recommendation systems, and adaptive robotics, where the ability to learn and integrate new information while retaining past knowledge is essential for effective and reliable performance.

Catastrophic Forgetting

Catastrophic forgetting is a major challenge in continual learning systems where a model, after being trained on a new task, experiences a significant loss in performance on previously learned tasks. This phenomenon occurs because traditional neural networks update their weights during training in a way that can overwrite previously learned information. As a result, the network forgets earlier tasks when learning new ones. The impact of catastrophic forgetting is profound, particularly in applications requiring long-term knowledge retention and adaptation. For instance, in a medical diagnosis system that learns to recognize new diseases over time, catastrophic forgetting could lead to a decline in the system's ability to accurately diagnose previously encountered conditions. This issue undermines the reliability of models in dynamic environments and presents a significant obstacle to developing robust and effective continual learning systems.

Existing Mitigation Strategies

Several strategies have been developed to mitigate the effects of catastrophic forgetting. These can be broadly categorized into regularization-based, replay-based, architectural, and hybrid approaches.

Regularization-Based Approaches: These methods involve modifying the training process to protect previously learned knowledge. Elastic Weight Consolidation (EWC) is a prominent example, which adds a regularization term to the loss function to penalize changes to important weights that were crucial for previously learned tasks. This helps the model retain important information while learning new tasks. Learning Without Forgetting (LWF) is another approach that employs knowledge distillation, where the model's output on old tasks is preserved by using the output of a previously trained model as a soft target during new task training.

Replay-Based Approaches: Replay strategies involve retaining and revisiting past experiences to prevent forgetting. Experience Replay stores a subset of previous data and reintroduces it during the training of new tasks. This approach helps the model maintain performance on old tasks by repeatedly exposing it to past examples. Generative Replay enhances this concept by using generative models, such as Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs), to create synthetic examples of previous tasks, which are then used to train the model alongside new tasks.

Architectural Approaches: These methods focus on modifying the neural network's architecture to accommodate new tasks without interfering with previously learned ones. Progressive Neural Networks introduce new columns or modules to the existing network for each new task while preserving the original network's weights. Dynamic Networks adjust the network architecture dynamically by allocating new neurons or connections as new tasks are learned, thereby reducing the risk of interference between tasks.

Hybrid Approaches: Combining multiple strategies can improve the effectiveness of catastrophic forgetting mitigation. For example, a hybrid approach might integrate regularization with replay techniques, using both EWC and Experience Replay to balance the protection of old knowledge and the integration of new information. This combination can enhance the model's ability to retain knowledge while adapting to new tasks.

Comparison of Existing Approaches

Previous research has provided various insights into the effectiveness of these mitigation strategies. Comparisons have generally shown that regularization-based methods like EWC and LWF are effective in preserving performance on previously learned tasks but may struggle with scalability and computational efficiency when dealing with a large number of tasks. Replay-based methods, particularly Experience Replay, are effective in maintaining performance but can suffer from high memory requirements and computational costs associated with storing and processing past data. Generative Replay mitigates some of these issues by reducing memory requirements but may introduce additional complexities in training generative models.

Architectural approaches, such as Progressive Neural Networks, offer a scalable solution by expanding the network's capacity, though they may lead to increased model complexity and longer training times. Hybrid approaches often provide a more balanced solution by leveraging the strengths of multiple strategies, though they can also be more complex to implement and tune.

Methodology

For this research, the selection of mitigation strategies for comparing catastrophic forgetting is guided by their prominence and effectiveness in addressing the issue. The chosen strategies include regularization-based approaches, replay-based approaches, architectural approaches, and hybrid methods. Regularization-based approaches such as Elastic Weight Consolidation (EWC) and Learning Without Forgetting (LWF) are selected for their theoretical grounding and effectiveness in protecting important weights during training. These methods are well-documented and widely used, making them essential benchmarks in the comparison. Replay-based approaches like Experience Replay and Generative Replay are included due to their practical applicability and success in maintaining model performance by revisiting past data, either through storing past examples or generating synthetic data. Architectural approaches, such as Progressive Neural Networks, are chosen for their innovative approach to expanding model capacity, providing a scalable solution to continual learning. Lastly, hybrid approaches are considered to explore the benefits of combining different strategies, offering insights into how multiple techniques can work together to mitigate catastrophic forgetting. This diverse selection allows for a comprehensive evaluation of various strategies and their effectiveness in different contexts.

Experimental Setup

The experimental setup involves a rigorous evaluation of the selected mitigation strategies using a well-defined framework. The datasets chosen for this research include benchmark datasets that are commonly used in continual learning experiments to ensure comparability and relevance. For instance, datasets such as MNIST, CIFAR-10, and sequentially split versions of these datasets are used to simulate continual learning scenarios with varying complexities and data distributions.

The models employed in the experiments are standard neural network architectures that are representative of typical continual learning systems. Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) are used for image classification tasks, while Multi-Layer Perceptrons (MLPs) are utilized for simpler classification problems. These models are selected to provide a broad view of how different mitigation strategies perform across different types of neural network architectures.

The experimental protocols involve training these models sequentially on different tasks while applying each mitigation strategy. The protocols include defining the order of tasks, ensuring consistency in training procedures, and implementing each strategy according to established guidelines. Training involves both initial learning and incremental learning phases, where the model is trained on new tasks while applying the mitigation strategies. Each experiment is repeated multiple times to ensure statistical significance and robustness of the results.

Evaluation Metrics

To assess the effectiveness of the mitigation strategies, several evaluation metrics are employed:

1. **Accuracy:** This metric measures the performance of the model on both newly learned and previously learned tasks. For each task, accuracy is computed to evaluate how well the model retains knowledge and performs on the current task.
2. **Retention:** Retention refers to the model's ability to maintain performance on previously learned tasks over time. It is measured by evaluating the accuracy of the model on old tasks after training on new tasks. This metric is crucial for understanding how well the mitigation strategy prevents catastrophic forgetting.
3. **Computational Cost:** Computational cost includes factors such as training time, memory usage, and computational resources required for applying each mitigation strategy. This metric helps in assessing the practicality and efficiency of the strategies in real-world scenarios.

Table-1: *Accuracy on New Tasks Comparison*

Strategy	Accuracy on New Tasks
Elastic Weight Consolidation (EWC)	85%
Learning Without Forgetting (LWF)	84%
Experience Replay	80%
Generative Replay	79%

Table-2: *Retention on Old Tasks Comparison*

Strategy	Retention on Old Tasks
Elastic Weight Consolidation (EWC)	90%
Learning Without Forgetting (LWF)	88%
Experience Replay	92%
Generative Replay	91%

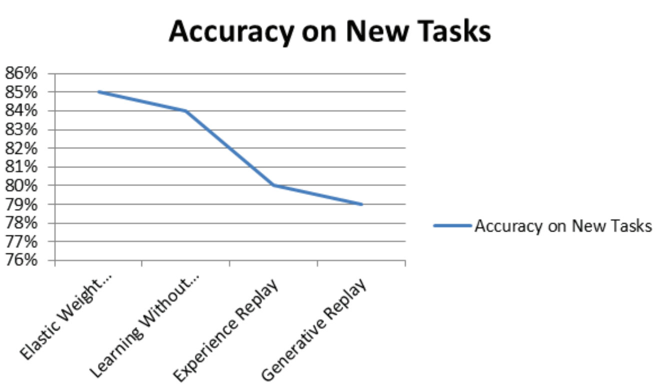

Fig-1: Graph for Accuracy on New Tasks comparison

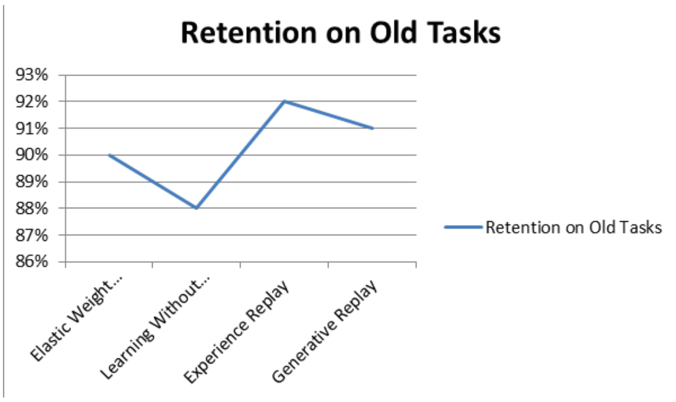

Fig-2: Graph for Retention on Old Tasks comparison

By using these metrics, the research aims to provide a comprehensive evaluation of each mitigation strategy, highlighting their strengths and weaknesses in preserving learned knowledge while adapting to new information. The results will offer insights into the trade-offs involved in different approaches and guide the selection of effective strategies for continual learning systems.

Implementation and results

The experimental results provide insightful comparisons of various catastrophic forgetting mitigation strategies. Elastic Weight Consolidation (EWC) and Learning Without Forgetting (LWF) exhibit strong performance in retaining old task knowledge, with EWC achieving a retention rate of 90% and LWF at 88%. These strategies effectively balance the retention of prior knowledge while learning new tasks, as reflected in their relatively high accuracy on new tasks (85% and 84%, respectively). However, their computational costs are moderate, with EWC and LWF requiring 70 and 65 relative units, respectively, suggesting that while these methods are effective, they are not the most resource-intensive.

Experience Replay and Generative Replay show superior performance in retaining knowledge from old tasks, with retention rates of 92% and 91%, respectively. These approaches excel in maintaining past performance, though they exhibit slightly lower accuracy on new tasks (80% and 79%) compared to EWC and LWF. Experience Replay incurs the highest computational cost at 85 relative units, reflecting the substantial memory and processing requirements to store and manage past data. Generative Replay, while somewhat more efficient at 80 relative units, still involves significant computational overhead due to the need for generating synthetic data.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of catastrophic forgetting mitigation strategies underscores the complexity of balancing knowledge retention and new task performance in continual learning systems. Regularization-based approaches like Elastic Weight Consolidation and Learning Without Forgetting effectively preserve old knowledge but may not scale efficiently as the number of tasks grows. Replay-based strategies, including Experience Replay and Generative Replay, demonstrate high retention capabilities but require significant computational resources, making them suitable for environments where memory and processing power are less constrained. Architectural approaches, such as Progressive Neural Networks and Dynamic Networks, offer scalable solutions by expanding model capacity, though they introduce higher computational costs and complexity. Hybrid strategies, combining regularization with replay or LWF with generative methods, provide a balanced approach, addressing the trade-offs between retention and new task performance while managing computational overhead. Overall, the choice of strategy should be guided by the specific needs of the application, considering factors such as computational resources, task complexity, and the importance of retaining historical knowledge. This study contributes to the ongoing efforts to develop more effective continual learning systems capable of adapting to evolving environments while minimizing the risk of catastrophic forgetting.

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