Bi-Objective Continual Learning: Learning ‘New’ While Consolidating ‘Known’

Xiaoyu Tao,1 Xiaopeng Hong,1,3∗ Xinyuan Chang,2 Yihong Gong2
1Faculty of Electronic and Information Engineering, Xi’an Jiaotong University
2School of Software Engineering, Xi’an Jiaotong University
3Research Center for Artificial Intelligence, Peng Cheng Laboratory
{txy666793, cxy19960919}@stu.xjtu.edu.cn, {hongxiaopeng, ygong}@mail.xjtu.edu.cn

Abstract
In this paper, we propose a novel single-task continual learning framework named Bi-Objective Continual Learning (BOCL). BOCL aims at both consolidating historical knowledge and learning from new data. On one hand, we propose to preserve the old knowledge using a small set of pillars, and develop the pillar consolidation (PLC) loss to preserve the old knowledge and to alleviate the catastrophic forgetting problem. On the other hand, we develop the contrastive pillar (CPL) loss to improve the classification performance, and examine several data sampling strategies for efficient onsite learning from ‘new’ with a reasonable amount of computational resources. Comprehensive experiments on CIFAR10/100, CORE50 and a subset of ImageNet validate the BOCL framework. We also reveal the performance accuracy of different sampling strategies when used to finetune a given CNN model. The code will be released.

Introduction
In recent years, Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) have achieved superior performances in a broad range of computer vision tasks (Krizhevsky, Sutskever, and Hinton 2012; He et al. 2015; Wang et al. 2010; Ren et al. 2015; Redmon et al. 2015; Cheng et al. 2016; Shun et al. 2016; Long, Shelhamer, and Darrell 2015; Chen et al. 2017; Liu et al. 2017; Deng et al. 2018; Tusung-Yu, Aruni, and Subhransu 2015; Wei et al. 2018a; 2018b). Nonetheless, when a CNN model is put into a continuous use, it will inevitably encounter new data it has never seen before, and may produce erroneous recognition results. For a model to stand the test of time, it is crucial to learn from them to improve the recognition performance continuously. This ability is referred to as continual learning (CL) (Paris et al. 2019) in the literature.

Recent CL works (Kirkpatrick et al. 2017; Zenke, Poole, and Ganguli 2017; Li and Hoiem 2018; Lee et al. 2017; Lopez-Paz and others 2017; Chaudhry et al. 2018) usually conduct their research under a multi-task (MT) setting, where the model is required to learn a sequence of independent tasks. Each task is assigned with a specific classification layer for prediction during the test phase. Such setting requires task identity for selecting the task-specific classifier, which is hard to be satisfied in practical where task information is typically unknown. Another series of work (Rebuffi et al. 2017; Castro et al. 2018; Wu et al. 2019) carries out research under a single-task, class-incremental-learning (ST-CIL) setting, where the model meets a sequence of new class training samples and is required to incrementally learn a unified classification layer for all encountered classes. This CIL setting is based on the assumption that new training data comes from new classes.

Table 1: A comparison of the CL problem settings

| Setting | task-free | classifiers | NC | NI |
|---------|-----------|-------------|----|----|
| MT      | no        | task-specific | perhaps | perhaps |
| ST-CIL  | yes       | unified     | yes | no |
| ST-NIL  | yes       | unique      | no  | yes |

In practical use, the deployed models are often exposed to new instances of existing classes with new patterns. It is crucial for the model to learn from them to improve the recognition performance continuously. This scenario is common in real-world applications, but is seldom explored by current CL research. In this paper, we organize our study based on this scenario. We adopt a single-task, new-instance learning (ST-NIL) setting that aims to improve the recognition performance on existing classes by continuously learning on new instances. ST-NIL is originally proposed in (Maltoni and Lomonaco 2018) with a naïve baseline that simply finetunes the model on new instances. Table 1 compares the differences of the three settings mentioned above.

To accomplish CL, a straightforward approach is to retrain the model on both old and new data. It is inefficient or even prohibitive in practical, especially for embedded systems where resources are too limited to perform retraining. Alternatively, we can finetune the model on new data. However, this is prone to catastrophic forgetting (French 1999) that the performance on old data deteriorates drastically. Hence current CL works mainly focus on mitigating forgetting. Some works attempt to preserve old tasks’ knowledge by imposing regularization to the network weights (Kirk-
These methods are typically based on certain naïve assumptions about the weights’ posterior distribution, which may not hold in complex scenarios. Another series of work introduces the idea of knowledge distillation (Hinton, Vinyals, and Dean 2015) into CL, where a distillation loss is used for maintaining the old knowledge contained in the output logits. As a supplement, they usually adopt the rehearsal (Lopez-Paz and others 2017) technique that stores or generates a small set of samples representative of old data for mitigating forgetting.

In this paper, we focus on ST-NIL setting and propose a novel CL framework named Bi-Objective Continual Learning (BOCL), which aims at both consolidating historical knowledge and learning from new data, as shown in Figure 1. On one hand, to mitigate forgetting, we propose to preserve the old knowledge using pillars, which are linked to the representative feature points of the historical data, and develop the Pillar Consolidation (PLC) loss term to penalize the shift of pillars in the feature space during the subsequent learning sessions. On the other hand, to efficiently learn new patterns from new data, we propose the Contrastive Pillar (CPL) loss term that pushes a new training example to its nearest pillar with the same class label (C), while pulling it away from those with different labels (A and B).

![Figure 1: Conceptual visualization of the PLC and CPL loss terms](image)

We develop the CPL loss term to improve the classification performance of the on-site ‘learning from new’ phase using the pillars. Moreover, we examine several data sampling strategies for learning with reasonable amount of computational resources.

**Related Work**

**Multi-task (MT) methods.** A series of works adopts the MT setting for CL. Most of them focus on overcoming catastrophic forgetting. An earlier work LwF (Li and Hoiem 2018) firstly introduces the idea of knowledge distillation (Hinton, Vinyals, and Dean 2015) into multi-task CL to mitigate forgetting. It uses the distillation loss to stabilize the old tasks’ output during finetuning on new task. EWC (Kirkpatrick et al. 2017) and its variant, SI (Zenke, Poole, and Ganguli 2017) attempt to alleviate forgetting by imposing constraint to the network weights related to old tasks. They approximate the posterior distribution of the weights as Gaussian distribution to measure their importance. IMM (Lee et al. 2017) incrementally matches the moment of the posterior distribution of the weights on old and new tasks, respectively. It requires to average two networks for prediction. GEM and its accelerated version, A-GEM, use an external memory to store representative examples of historical tasks. The pre-stored examples are used for computing and constraining old tasks’ losses.

In contrast to these MT methods, we focus on the single-task (ST) setting, which treats the whole learning process as one task and use a unique classification layer for all encountered data. For comparison purpose, we adapt some representative MT methods to the ST-NIL setting, including EWC, SI, IMM and A-GEM.

**Single-task class-incremental learning (ST-CIL) methods.** The ST-CIL methods incrementally learn a unified clas-
sification layer to recognize all encountered classes. Many of them adopt the distillation technique to alleviate forgetting on old classes, where the distillation loss is applied to the output logits/probabilities corresponding to old classes (Rebuffi et al. 2017; Castro et al. 2018; Wu et al. 2019). These distillation-based ST-CIL methods can not be directly used for the ST-NIL setting, as new training data has the same classes as the old one and the number of output logits remains unchanged during the whole training process. For comparison, we adopt the representative EEIL (Castro et al. 2018) method to ST-NIL setting by using the examples of old data for computing the distillation loss.

Problem Description

We define the single-task, new-instance learning (ST-NIL) problem setting as follows. The entire set of training data is divided into \( N \) independent training sessions \( S = \{S_1, S_2, \ldots, S_N\} \), where \( S_i = \{\{X_j, y_j\}\}_{j=1}^{n_i} \), \( X_j \) and \( y_j \) are the training image and label, respectively. Each session contains new training patterns of the same classes from a predefined, common label space \( L = \{1, \ldots, C\} \), where \( C \) is the number of classes. The model is learned on all training sessions in \( S \) in a sequential manner with a unique classification layer, and gradually improve the recognition performance on the common test set \( T \).

Bi-Objective Contingual Learning Framework

Given an input \( X \), a CNN can be seen as a composition of a feature extractor \( f(X; \theta) \) and a cascaded classification layer that predicts the probabilities over classes. To accomplish the ST-NIL setting, we start by training the network on \( S_1 \) from scratch with the cross-entropy loss. Then, we finetune the model on the subsequent sessions \( \{S_2, \ldots, S_n\} \) one by one. Directly finetuning on \( S_i, i > 1 \) would degrade the performance on previous sessions \( \{S_1, \ldots, S_{i-1}\} \), due to catastrophic forgetting. To address this problem, we try to preserve the old knowledge using a small set of pillars \( P = \{p_k\}_{k=1}^{P} \). A pillar is a representative point in the feature space defined by \( f(\cdot; \theta) \), which can be seen as a key memory of the knowledge. It takes the form of a 4-tuple: \( p_k = (a_k, \omega_k, I_k, b_k) \), where \( k \) denotes the index, \( a_k \in \mathbb{R}^n \) is the \( n \)-dim feature vector, \( \omega_k \in \mathbb{R}^n \) is a vector that stores important statistics for \( a_k \). We additionally store a sample image \( I_k \) and its corresponding label \( b_k \) to compute the active values of \( a_k \), which is \( f(I_k; \theta) \).

By using the pillars to represent the knowledge, we formulate ST-NIL as the bi-objective optimization problem. The overall loss function at the \( i \)-th session is defined as:

\[
\ell(S_i; P_{i-1}; \theta_i) = \ell_{f_{n}}(S_i; P_{i-1}; \theta_i) + \lambda \ell_{pcl}(P_{i-1}; \theta_i).
\]

In the above equation, \( \ell_{f_{n}} \) is the loss term for learning new knowledge from new data, and \( \ell_{pcl} \) is the Pillar Consolidation (PLC) term for consolidating the old knowledge. We use \( \theta_i \) to denote the active values of \( \theta \) at session \( i \). The hyper-parameter \( \lambda > 0 \) balances the strength of \( \ell_{f_{n}} \) and \( \ell_{pcl} \). We name the overall framework as the Bi-Objective Contingual Learning (BOCL) framework. In the following subsections, we will elaborate the components of BOCL in detail.

Figure 2: Illustration of the self-organizing map (SOM).

Pillar Set Generation

After training on session \( S_i \), we extract the set of feature vectors \( F_i = \{f(X; \theta_i) | X \in S_i\} \), and generate the pillar set \( P_i \) on \( F_i \). To achieve this purpose, we try to map high-dimensional \( F_i \) to low-dimensional \( P_i \) using a self-organizing map (SOM) (Kohonen 2013). SOM is a neural network that produces a low-dimensional (typically 2D), discretized representation of the input space of the training data. As shown in Figure 2, it consists of an input layer, which is fed with the feature vectors in \( F_i \), and a competitive layer, which contains \( K \times K \) nodes organized in a regular 2D grid \( M_i = \{m_k^{(i)}\}_{k=1}^{K^2} \), where \( m_k^{(i)} \) denotes the centroid vector of node \( k \). SOM maintains the neighbourhood relationship of the centroid vectors in topology space; similar centroids are located closer while less similar ones gradually farther away. This property makes SOM efficient for searching nearest neighbours. Given an input vector \( f \in F_i \), SOM finds the ‘winner’ node \( c \) hit by \( f \), by picking the centroid vector \( m_c \) closest to \( f \):

\[
c = \arg \min_k \|f - m_k\|_2^2. \tag{2}
\]

When training SOM on \( F_i \), \( m_c \) is updated by averaging all feature vectors that hit node \( c \) using the batching-computing technique in (Kohonen 2013). Therefore, each centroid can represent the set of the feature vectors closest to it, which reflects the distribution of the neighbourhood feature space. Moreover, we can adapt SOM to new data easily and efficiently by updating the centroids. All these properties make SOM a good choice for generating pillars.

We train a SOM of size \( K \times K \) to generate \( K^2 \) pillars, where each SOM node corresponds to a pillar point. For the \( k \)-th pillar \( p_k = (a_k, \omega_k, I_k, b_k) \) generated by the \( k \)-th SOM node, we define \( \omega_k \) as the weighting vector that measures the importance of each dimension of \( a_k \). Some dimensions of \( a_k \) may encode semantic attributes of high intra-class diversity (e.g. color), and we should allow free adaptations of these dimensions in order to learn new patterns better. This is achieved by assigning a smaller weight to these dimensions when consolidating them for mitigating forgetting. To get \( \omega_k \), we compute the variance for each dimension of the feature vectors that hit SOM node \( k \), which we have:

\[
\omega_k = \left( \frac{1}{v_{k,1}}, \frac{1}{v_{k,2}}, \ldots, \frac{1}{v_{k,n}} \right), \tag{3}
\]
Pillar Consolidation

Given the pillar set \( P_{t-1} = \{p_k\}_{k=1}^{P_{t-1}} \) constructed from the previous sessions, PLC accomplishes the objective of preserving the old knowledge by constraining the pillars to remain as stable as possible in the feature space. Expressing this in math form, we have:

\[
\ell_{plc}(P_{t-1}; \theta_i) = \sum_{k=1}^{P_{t-1}} ||\omega_k \odot f(I_k; \theta_i) - \omega_k \odot a_k||_2^2, \tag{4}
\]

where \( \odot \) denotes the element-wise multiplication between the two vectors of the same dimension. We re-weight each dimension of the pillar’s feature vectors \( f(I_k; \theta_i) \) (active) and \( a_k \) (pre-stored) using \( \omega_k \) computed in Eq. (3), allowing those dimensions of high diversity freely adapt to new training patterns contained in new instances.

Figure 1(a-c) illustrates the motivation of the proposed PLC term. A small set of pillar points represents the topological structure of the historical data distribution in the feature space, and can be considered as the key memories of the historical knowledge. The conventional way of finetuning the model on new data breaks this topological structure, causing the catastrophic forgetting problem. PLC strives to alleviate catastrophic forgetting by maintaining this topological structure in the feature space.

Onsite Learning with Contrastive Pillar Term

Given \( S_i \) and the pillar set \( P_{t-1} \), we enforce the learned feature of a new training instance \((X_j, y_j) \in S_i\) to be as close as possible to its nearest matching pillar with the same class label \( b_n = y_j \), and as far away as possible to other pillars with different labels. Figure 1(d) illustrates the motivation of the proposed CPL term. Cooperating CPL term with the cross-entropy loss, we formulate \( \ell_{fnn}(S_i, P_{t-1}; \theta_i) \) as:

\[
\ell_{fnn}(S_i, P_{t-1}; \theta_i) = \sum_{j=1}^{||S_i||} \left( - \log \hat{p}_{y_j}(X_j; \theta_i) + \gamma \sum_{l \neq y_j} \sum_{n \in N_{y_j,l}} \|f(X_j; \theta_i) - a_m\|_2^2 \right). \tag{5}
\]

The first term on the right-hand side of Eq. (5) is the cross-entropy loss, where \( \hat{p}_{y_j}(X_j; \theta_i) \) is the estimated probability of the label \( y_j \). The second term is the proposed CPL term, where \( a_m \) is the feature vector of the nearest matching pillar of \( f(X_j; \theta_i) \) with the label \( b_m = y_j \) and \( N_{y_j,l} \) is the index set of the \( K_p \) nearest neighbours of the feature \( f(X_j; \theta_i) \) subject to \( \forall t \in N_{y_j,l} \), \( a_t \in P_{t-1} \) and \( b_t = l \). As discussed above, we use SOM to select nearest neighbours efficiently. \( \gamma \) is used for controlling the strength of the CPL term.

Sampling Strategies for Onsite Learning

Generally speaking, a large volume of training data are desirable to guarantee a high-quality model training. Thus existing methods usually use all the new data for ‘present’ session. Nonetheless, it is problematic to learn from unlimited data stream in mobile devices with limited computational power and energy consumption. Therefore, to provide more computationally efficient solutions, we sample a subset \( S_{\tilde{i}} \) from \( S_i \) using some strategy \( \mathcal{R} \) and finetune the network \( \theta_{i-1} \) only on \( S_{\tilde{i}} \), where \( S_{\tilde{i}} = \mathcal{R}(S_i) \). As the data distribution of \( S_{\tilde{i}} \) may vary from that of \( S_i \), the recognition performance of the trained model is affected by different sampling strategies. Therefore, we explore several sampling strategies \( \mathcal{R} \) for on-site learning and compare their performance for CL.

**Random sampling** (\( \mathcal{R}_{\text{rand}} \)): We finetune the model using \( K_s \) examples randomly sampled from \( S_i \) as the baseline sampling strategy.

**Sampling hard examples** (\( \mathcal{R}_{\text{hard}} \)): We finetune the model only by hard examples, which are mined by computing the classification loss for each \((X, y) \in S_i\) using the network \( \theta_{i-1} \) trained on \( S_{i-1} \), and then selecting \( K_s \) examples with the highest losses.

**Sampling misclassified examples** (\( \mathcal{R}_{\text{err}} \)): A straightforward way to boost the performance of an existing model is to learn from misclassified examples (Dalal and Triggs 2005). We randomly pick a set of \( K_s \) examples \( \{(X_j, y_j)\}_{j=1}^{K_s} \subset S_i \) that are misclassified by the network \( \theta_{i-1} \) trained on \( S_{i-1} \), and finetune the model only using these \( K_s \) examples.

**Experiments**

**Experimental Setups**

We conduct experimental evaluations using the ST-NIL problem setting. We use CIFAR10/100 (Krizhevsky and
CIFAR10/100 dataset. Both datasets contain 60,000 natural RGB images of the size $32 \times 32$, including 50,000 training and 10,000 test images. CIFAR10 has 10 classes, while CIFAR100 has 100 classes. We further split the training images into 5 sessions, and apply different illumination and saturation for each subsequent session as new training patterns.

CORe50 dataset. It consists of 164,866 images of 50 domestic objects, which are split into eleven sessions. Three sessions (#3, #7 and #10) are selected for test and the remaining ones for training. Each session contains about 15,000 RGB-D images of the size $15 \times 15 \times 64$.

SubImageNet. We select a 1000-class subset from the original ImageNet-1k dataset as the subImageNet. It contains 250,000 training images that are split into 5 training sessions. Each image is resized and cropped to $250 \times 250$.

Comparison Results

We compare the proposed BOCL with the state-of-the-arts on CIFAR10, CIFAR100, CORe50 and subImageNet. The results are shown in Figure 3. All the methods are finetuned on the full and the $R_{\text{rnd}}$ sampled set for each training session, respectively. We choose $R_{\text{rnd}}$ as our final sampling strategy, because it outperforms other strategies. In all the figures, the green line corresponds to the naive finetuning method. The deep blue line represents the upper-bound cumulative method that jointly trains all encountered data. We use the red and orange lines for Our-PLC and Our-PLC-CPL, respectively. The experimental results in Figure 3 are summarized as follows:

- With both datasets, and for training on both the full and the sampled set, our proposed BOCL outperforms other state-of-the-art methods on each encountered session, and its accuracy curves is the closest to that of the upper bound cumulative method.

- By comparing each pair of the red and green lines in Figure 3, we can easily observe that the BOCL with PLC alone outperforms the naive method by up to 9.22%. Moreover, using both PLC and CPL terms further achieves up to 1.53% accuracy gain than using PLC alone. It is thus safe to conclude that both two terms contribute to the model’s performance improvement.

- With CIFAR10, after learning all the sessions, BOCL achieves accuracy of 77.43% and 72.10% when finetuning on the full and randomly sampled training set, respectively. In comparison, the second best one namely A-GEM* achieves the accuracy of 75.16% and 70.97%, correspondingly, BOCL outperforms the best A-GEM* method by up to 2.27%.

- With CIFAR100, BOCL achieves the final accuracy of 53.76% and 41.87% when finetuning on the full and randomly sampled training set, respectively, while the second best one A-GEM* achieves the accuracy of 51.24% and 40.89%, correspondingly. BOCL outperforms A-GEM* by up to 2.52%.

- With CORe50, BOCL achieves the accuracy of 74.31% and 67.83% when finetuning on the full and randomly sampled training set, respectively, while the corresponding accuracy achieved by A-GEM* are 71.54% and 65.23%, respectively. BOCL outperforms A-GEM* by up to 2.77%.

- With subImageNet, when finetuning on the full training set, BOCL achieves the top-5 accuracy of 50.32%, exceeding the second best IMM* (48.52%) by 1.80%; while for randomly sampled training set, BOCL achieves the top-5 accuracy of 37.77%, outperforming the second best A-GEM* (34.53%) by 3.24%. It demonstrate the effectiveness of BOCL on the dataset with a large number of classes.

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1The code is released at https://github.com/xyutao/bocl.
Ablation Study

To investigate the impact of each component of BOCL, we perform comprehensive ablation studies on CIFAR10 dataset using full set of new data. In our BOCL, we train a SOM to generate the pillar set that represents the knowledge in the feature space, which is used by PLC term for mitigating forgetting and CPL term for improving feature learning on new instances. Alternatively, we can use random sampling as in (Castro et al. 2018) to select representative examples, and then impose quadratic constraint to their features or compute distillation loss to mitigate forgetting.

Table 2 compares the test accuracy at the last session achieved by different terms with different strategy for preserving the knowledge. PLC denotes the quadratic feature regularization term without the re-weighting vector $\omega_k$. We can learn that using pillars and feature re-weighting technique achieves the best accuracy, as it provides more comprehensive statistics of the feature space (i.e., $\omega$) to facilitate the consolidation of old knowledge.

Study of Sampling Strategies

To examine the three sampling strategies, we compare the naïve, cumulative, and our BOCL on the CIFAR10 training sessions sampled with $R_{rnd}$, $R_{hard}$, and $R_{err}$, respectively, as illustrated in Figure 4 (a - c). For the random sampling strategy $R_{rnd}$ in Figure 4 (a), the BOCL method (the red solid lines) has a steady-state growth in accuracy and are close to the cumulative method (the blue dashed lines). For the other two strategies $R_{hard}$ and $R_{err}$ in Figure 4 (b) and (c), the performance of the naïve method (the green dashed lines) drops significantly for subsequent sessions which indicates the occurrence of catastrophic forgetting. BOCL method can effectively alleviate catastrophic
The proposed BOCL method avoids catastrophic forgetting using the PLC term that penalizes the shift of the pillars in the feature space \( f \) (Eq. (4)). In comparison, other approaches typically impose constraints to the network’s parameter space \( \theta \), such as EWC (Kirkpatrick et al. 2017), or to the network’s classification outputs, such as EEIL (Castro et al. 2018). On the contrary, BOCL constrains the pillars in the feature space, avoiding the pillars from shifting, while allowing the feature space adapting for new data freely. The feature space has higher dimensionality than the output space and contains richer information for representing the learned knowledge. Thus constraining the feature space is more effective for learning ‘new’ while consolidating ‘known’, which is demonstrated by the experimental results shown in Figure 3.

We also investigated three different sampling strategies for online learning: random sampling, hard-example sampling and misclassified-example sampling. Experimental evaluations have revealed that random sampling is the simplest yet most effective sample strategy for finetuning the model on new data.

### Conclusion

We focus on the single-task new-instance learning (ST-NIL) problem and propose a bi-objective continual learning framework. For alleviating forgetting, we propose the PLC loss term to penalize the shift of pillars in the feature space during finetuning. For efficient online learning from new data, we propose the CPL loss term to enhance the classification performance. By using pillars as a carrier of the past knowledge, the PCL term provides a seamless mechanism to link the target of ‘learning from new’ to those of ‘consolidating old’. We also investigate different strategies for sampling new instances. Experimental results show that the proposed BOCL remarkably outperforms the state-of-the-art methods. BOCL is simple and efficient, with less computational and storage overhead when cooperating with deep CNNs. Next, we will generalize BOCL to more applications and put it into practical use.
Acknowledgements

This work is supported by National Basic Research Program of China (Grant No.2015CB351705) and National Major Project (Grant No.2017YFC0803905).

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