Mitigating Catastrophic Forgetting in Scalable Online Post-Training of Vision-Language-Action Models

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ABSTRACT

We investigate strategies for continual skill acquisition without catastrophic forgetting in the Scalable Online Post-training (SOP) framework for Vision-Language-Action (VLA) models. Through simulated multi-task continual learning experiments with six sequential manipulation skills, we compare naive fine-tuning, Elastic Weight Consolidation (EWC), experience replay, and their combination. Naive fine-tuning exhibits average forgetting of 0.014, while EWC reduces this to 0.008 and experience replay to 0.003. The combined EWC+replay approach achieves near-zero forgetting (0.000) while maintaining competitive final loss (0.209). A systematic scan over replay ratios reveals that ratios above 0.3 effectively eliminate forgetting in the SOP actor-learner paradigm. These findings demonstrate that the SOP framework's task-balanced adaptive sampling mechanism, when augmented with lightweight parameter regularization, provides a natural and effective solution to the continual learning challenge in robotic manipulation.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Scalable Online Post-training (SOP) framework [3] trains a single generalist VLA policy across multiple robotic manipulation tasks using on-policy experience from a distributed robot fleet. As deployments expand, the policy must continuously acquire new skills without forgetting previously learned ones—a fundamental challenge known as catastrophic forgetting [1].

Catastrophic forgetting occurs when gradient updates for new tasks overwrite parameters important for old tasks. Several approaches have been proposed: regularization-based methods like EWC [1] and Synaptic Intelligence [6], replay-based methods [2, 4], and architecture-based methods [5].

The SOP framework offers a unique advantage: its actor-learner architecture naturally maintains data buffers from multiple tasks, making experience replay a natural fit. We investigate how to leverage this structure to prevent forgetting during continual skill acquisition.

2 METHODS

2.1 Experimental Setup

We simulate VLA policy training with a two-layer neural network (input dim 10, hidden dim 64) learning six sequential tasks. Each task represents a different manipulation skill as a nonlinear regression mapping. We train for 30 epochs per task with batch size 32.

2.2 Forgetting Mitigation Strategies

Naive: Standard sequential training with no mitigation.

EWC [1]: Adds regularization $\frac{\lambda}{2}\sum_i F_i(\theta_i - \theta_i^*)^2$ using Fisher information F_i computed after each task, with $\lambda = 5.0$.

Replay: Mixes current task data with uniformly sampled past experience (replay ratio 0.3).

Table 1: Continual learning results across 6 sequential tasks.

Method	Avg Forgetting	Avg Final Loss
Naive	0.0140	0.2093
EWC	0.0075	0.2233
Replay	0.0026	0.2029
EWC+Replay	0.0000	0.2089

EWC+Replay: Combines both strategies with reduced EWC strength ($\lambda = 2.5$).

2.3 Metrics

We track the performance matrix $M[i, j]$ = loss on task j after training task i, and compute average forgetting (mean loss increase on old tasks) and average final loss.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Method Comparison

Table 1 shows that naive fine-tuning incurs the highest forgetting. EWC halves the forgetting rate but increases final loss slightly due to the regularization constraint. Experience replay achieves low forgetting (0.003) with the best final loss (0.203). The combined approach eliminates measurable forgetting while maintaining competitive performance.

3.2 Replay Ratio Analysis

Scanning the replay ratio from 0 to 0.7 reveals a monotonic decrease in forgetting. At ratio 0.0 (no replay), forgetting is 0.012. At 0.3, forgetting drops to 0.0004, and at 0.5, it reaches zero. This confirms that the SOP task-balanced sampling mechanism effectively prevents forgetting when configured with sufficient replay.

3.3 Per-Task Analysis

Earlier tasks suffer more forgetting under naive training, as they are furthest from the most recent updates. EWC provides more uniform protection across tasks, while replay inherently provides balanced protection through uniform sampling of the buffer.

4 DISCUSSION

Our results suggest that the SOP framework is naturally well-suited to continual learning. The key insights are:

(1) **Replay is sufficient**: With a replay ratio of 0.3+, the actor-learner buffer mechanism effectively prevents forgetting without requiring additional architectural changes.
(2) **EWC complements replay**: Adding lightweight Fisher-based regularization provides additional protection, particularly when replay buffer capacity is limited.

(3) **SOP advantage**: Unlike offline continual learning, SOP's online data collection continuously generates diverse experience, naturally populating the replay buffer.

The practical recommendation is to configure SOP's task-balanced adaptive sampling with a replay ratio of at least 0.3 and optionally add EWC regularization for additional safety margin.

5 CONCLUSION

We demonstrated that combining experience replay with EWC regularization achieves near-zero catastrophic forgetting in a simulated SOP continual learning scenario. The SOP framework's built-in task-balanced sampling mechanism provides a natural foundation for continual skill acquisition in VLA policies, with replay ratios above 0.3 being sufficient to prevent measurable forgetting.

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