



Optimizing Federated Learning for Non-lid Data With Hierarchical Knowledge Distillation

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Abstract

Federated Learning (FL) has emerged as a promising solution for decentralized model training, but its effectiveness is significantly hindered by Non-Independent and Identically Distributed (Non-IID) data across clients. Traditional aggregation techniques struggle to maintain model stability and convergence under such heterogeneous conditions. This paper introduces Cross-Modal Gradient Synchronization (CMGS), a novel optimization approach designed to enhance FL on Non-IID data by aligning and synchronizing gradient updates across diverse data modalities. The proposed method leverages gradient alignment mechanisms, adaptive weighting strategies, and consensus-based synchronization to mitigate the impact of data heterogeneity. Experimental evaluations on benchmark datasets demonstrate that CMGS achieves superior model accuracy, faster convergence, and improved robustness compared to conventional FL techniques such as FedAvg and FedProx. Additionally, the approach is computationally efficient and scalable, making it well-suited for real-world applications. Future research directions include extending CMGS to large-scale FL networks, improving energy efficiency, and enhancing security measures.

Keywords: Federated Learning, Non-IID Data, Cross-Modal Gradient Synchronization, Gradient Alignment, Adaptive Aggregation, Model Convergence, Data Heterogeneity, Decentralized Learning, Machine Learning Optimization.

1. Introduction

Federated Learning (FL) has emerged as a transformative approach for distributed machine learning, enabling data to remain on local devices rather than being centrally stored. This decentralization ensures privacy and security while still allowing for the development of robust models. With the increasing use of FL in industries like healthcare, finance, and mobile devices, its potential for scaling and preserving user privacy has garnered significant attention. However, despite its promise, FL faces critical challenges that hinder its widespread adoption and effectiveness.

One of the most significant challenges in FL is dealing with Non-Independent and Identically Distributed (Non-IID) data. In traditional machine learning settings, data is assumed to be IID, meaning each data point is drawn from the same distribution. However, in real-world applications of FL, data on different devices can have vastly different distributions, leading to issues such as slower convergence rates, poor generalization, and biased model performance. This problem is

particularly apparent in settings where devices with diverse user behavior, regional preferences, or device-specific characteristics contribute to the model training process.

To address this issue, Hierarchical Knowledge Distillation (HKD) has emerged as a promising approach. HKD is a technique designed to transfer knowledge between models in a hierarchical manner, enabling better generalization across diverse data distributions. By distilling knowledge from multiple sources into a compact form, it can reduce the impact of non-IID data and improve the overall efficiency of federated learning models. The combination of HKD and FL presents an exciting opportunity to optimize performance despite the challenges posed by non-IID data.

This article aims to explore the optimization of federated learning for non-IID data by leveraging hierarchical knowledge distillation. We will first review the fundamental concepts of federated learning and the non-IID data problem, followed by a detailed explanation of how HKD can be integrated into FL. Through experimental results, we will evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed solution and demonstrate its potential to enhance the convergence and accuracy of federated models.

2. Federated Learning and Its Challenges

Federated Learning (FL) is an innovative machine learning paradigm designed to enable decentralized model training across multiple devices or edge nodes, without the need for raw data to leave its source. This approach has garnered significant attention due to its ability to preserve data privacy, particularly in sensitive industries such as healthcare, banking, and telecommunications. The key idea behind FL is that a global model is trained by aggregating updates from locally trained models, which are computed on data that never leaves the local devices.

Overview of Federated Learning

At its core, federated learning involves three primary components: local data on devices, local model training, and the aggregation of model updates. Each device or client trains its model on its local data and computes updates to the model's parameters. These updates, typically in the form of gradients, are then sent to a central server for aggregation. The server aggregates the updates from all clients and updates the global model, which is then sent back to the devices for further local training. This iterative process continues until convergence.

FL provides several benefits:

- **Privacy Preservation:** Since the raw data never leaves the device, user privacy is maintained, which is crucial for applications in sensitive domains such as medical data or personal information.
- **Reduced Bandwidth Usage:** Instead of transferring large datasets, only model updates are shared, significantly reducing communication overhead.
- **Scalability:** FL can handle large-scale distributed systems, making it ideal for applications with millions of devices, such as mobile phones or IoT sensors.

Benefits of Federated Learning in Privacy-Preserving Settings

One of the most compelling reasons to use FL is its ability to enable machine learning in privacy-sensitive applications. By keeping data localized, FL mitigates the risks associated with centralizing sensitive information, such as the potential for data breaches. In sectors like healthcare, where patient data is highly confidential, federated learning enables collaboration across institutions without compromising privacy. Similarly, in mobile environments, FL allows for personalized recommendations and predictive models while protecting user privacy.

Moreover, FL's decentralized nature supports compliance with data protection regulations, such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the European Union. With these regulations requiring that personal data is stored and processed in ways that safeguard user privacy, FL offers a viable solution that aligns with these legal frameworks.

Challenges of Federated Learning

While federated learning offers many benefits, it also presents a series of challenges that need to be addressed for its successful deployment. Some of these challenges include:

- **Non-IID Data:** One of the most significant challenges in FL is dealing with Non-Independent and Identically Distributed (Non-IID) data. Unlike traditional machine learning, where data is assumed to come from the same distribution, FL systems often involve heterogeneous data sources. For instance, data collected from different users or devices may vary significantly in terms of quality, quantity, and distribution. This data heterogeneity can lead to issues in model convergence, poor generalization, and biased predictions.
- **Communication Efficiency:** FL requires frequent communication between devices and the central server, which can be inefficient, especially in environments with limited bandwidth or network latency. Large model updates may need to be transmitted, leading to increased communication costs.
- **Device Heterogeneity:** Devices in federated learning environments vary in terms of computational resources, storage, and network connectivity. These differences can affect the efficiency of training and the convergence of the global model.
- **Security and Trust:** Although FL enhances privacy by keeping data decentralized, it introduces new security concerns, such as model poisoning attacks, where malicious devices might send harmful updates to corrupt the global model. Ensuring trust and security in FL systems is critical to their successful adoption.

Specific Focus on Non-IID Data Problem in FL

The Non-IID data problem is particularly problematic in federated learning. Data across clients can vary in terms of distribution, quality, and even the types of features they contain. For example, consider a federated learning system for mobile devices that is designed to predict user preferences for a music recommendation system. The data on each device—ranging from genre preferences to listening habits—may be vastly different, making it challenging for the global model to generalize effectively.

When the data is Non-IID, it disrupts the assumption that the data is uniformly distributed across all clients. This leads to several issues:

- **Slow Convergence:** Since the data on each client is not identically distributed, the model updates may conflict, slowing the convergence of the global model.
- **Model Bias:** The global model may become biased towards data that is more frequent or dominant in certain clients, neglecting the diversity of data on other clients.
- **Generalization Issues:** The final model may perform well on some clients but poorly on others, resulting in an inability to generalize across the entire population.

Current Approaches to Handle Non-IID Data

Several techniques have been proposed to address the challenges posed by Non-IID data in federated learning. These approaches aim to either mitigate the impact of data heterogeneity or adjust the federated learning process to better handle it.

- **Personalized Federated Learning:** One approach is to create personalized models for each client. Rather than training a single global model, federated learning can be adapted to create models that are fine-tuned to each client's data, helping to address the data heterogeneity.
 - **Federated Averaging with Weighted Updates:** Another method involves modifying the aggregation process to account for data heterogeneity. Clients can send model updates that are weighted based on the amount or quality of data available on each device. This method ensures that more representative clients contribute more significantly to the global model.
 - **Data Augmentation and Synthetic Data Generation:** In some cases, synthetic data generation techniques are used to balance the dataset across clients. By augmenting the data on clients with fewer samples, the model may perform better by reducing the bias caused by uneven data distributions.
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3. Non-IID Data and Its Impact on Federated Learning

In federated learning, data heterogeneity is an inherent challenge, particularly when the data is Non-Independent and Identically Distributed (Non-IID). Unlike traditional machine learning, where it is assumed that all data comes from the same distribution, federated learning systems operate on data that is distributed across various devices. Each device may contain data that varies in distribution, quality, and feature set, making it inherently Non-IID. Understanding how Non-IID data impacts federated learning and identifying effective strategies to mitigate these challenges is crucial for optimizing the performance of FL models.

Understanding Non-IID Data

Non-IID data refers to situations where the data collected from different clients (or devices) does not follow the same statistical distribution. This could mean that the data on each client differs in terms of feature distributions, class distributions, or data density. In the context of federated learning, Non-IID data is prevalent because each device might be collecting data from different environments, users, or contexts, leading to data that is not representative of the global population.

For example, in a federated learning system deployed on smartphones, one client may have data collected from urban users, while another has data from rural users. These two groups may exhibit distinct patterns in terms of app usage, language preferences, and internet connectivity. Such differences in data distribution introduce significant challenges for the training process.

There are two primary forms of Non-IID data that affect federated learning:

- **Feature-wise Non-IID:** This occurs when different devices have data with varying feature distributions. For instance, a medical federated learning model may have access to different medical conditions or test results across various hospitals, leading to uneven feature distributions.
- **Label-wise Non-IID:** This happens when the class distributions vary across clients. For example, in an image classification task, some devices might have mostly images of a specific class, such as cats, while others may have a more balanced dataset across different classes. The imbalance in label distributions across clients can hinder the ability of the federated model to generalize effectively.

How Non-IID Data Affects Federated Learning

The Non-IID nature of data significantly impacts the performance and convergence of federated learning models. When data on different clients is distributed differently, it disrupts the assumption that the data is homogeneous, which is crucial for the standard federated learning algorithms.

1. **Slow Convergence:** One of the most noticeable impacts of Non-IID data on federated learning is slower convergence. Since the model updates sent by different clients may be based on data with different distributions, these updates can conflict with each other, making it harder for the global model to reach an optimal solution. This leads to slower progress towards convergence compared to IID settings.
2. **Reduced Model Accuracy:** When federated learning is applied to Non-IID data, the final model may not perform well on all clients. Some clients may have more dominant features or labels that overly influence the model, while others may be underrepresented. This causes the model to be biased towards the data distribution of certain clients, leading to a reduced overall accuracy, especially on clients whose data is less represented.
3. **Poor Generalization:** Non-IID data in federated learning also leads to poor generalization. The global model may be trained on data that is not representative of the entire population, which results in overfitting to certain clients or data distributions. This leads to models that perform well on some clients but poorly on others, affecting the model's ability to generalize across the diverse range of clients in the system.
4. **Model Instability:** Non-IID data can cause fluctuations in model performance during training. The aggregation of gradients from diverse data distributions can lead to unstable training, where the model's weights oscillate or diverge instead of converging smoothly. This instability is more prominent when the differences in data distributions across clients are substantial.

Impact on Model Convergence and Performance

The challenges posed by Non-IID data become even more significant when considering the convergence rate of the global model. In federated learning, the model is trained by iteratively aggregating updates from local models. If the data across clients is Non-IID, the updates from each client may differ in magnitude and direction, leading to conflicting gradients. As a result, the aggregation process becomes more difficult, and the global model may take longer to converge or fail to converge altogether.

This slow convergence rate is particularly problematic in real-world scenarios where time and resources are limited. The longer the training process takes, the less feasible it becomes to deploy federated learning systems on a large scale. Moreover, the slower convergence means that the model may not reach its optimal performance in a timely manner, reducing its practical utility.

In addition to slow convergence, the global model's performance can be negatively impacted by Non-IID data. As mentioned earlier, the model may become biased towards the dominant data distributions, which means that certain clients with underrepresented data may see subpar model performance. For instance, in a federated learning model trained on a medical dataset, if one client's data represents a specific disease more frequently than others, the global model may become biased towards diagnosing that disease while underperforming in identifying other conditions. This issue can be especially problematic in applications requiring balanced performance across different data sources, such as healthcare, finance, and recommendation systems.

Techniques to Mitigate the Non-IID Data Challenge

Several techniques have been proposed to mitigate the effects of Non-IID data in federated learning. These strategies aim to reduce the data heterogeneity problem and help the federated model converge more quickly and generalize better across all clients.

1. **Personalized Federated Learning:** One approach to dealing with Non-IID data is to personalize the model for each client. Rather than training a single global model, federated learning can be adapted to create personalized models that are tailored to each client's data distribution. This personalization allows the model to better adapt to the unique characteristics of the local data, improving performance on each client device.
2. **Federated Averaging with Reweighted Updates:** Another common technique is to adjust the aggregation method. Instead of equally weighting all client updates, federated learning can use reweighted updates based on the data size or quality on each device. By giving more weight to clients with larger or more balanced datasets, this method helps reduce the influence of clients with skewed or biased data distributions.
3. **Data Augmentation and Synthesis:** Data augmentation techniques, such as generating synthetic data or transforming existing data (e.g., through rotation, scaling, or cropping in image data), can help mitigate the impact of Non-IID data. By augmenting the data on clients with fewer samples or underrepresented classes, the model becomes more robust and less biased toward any single data source.

4. **Model Regularization and Robust Optimization:** Regularization techniques, such as adding penalties to the loss function, can help prevent overfitting to the skewed data distributions on clients. Robust optimization methods aim to improve model stability and generalization by reducing the impact of outliers or noisy data.
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4. Hierarchical Knowledge Distillation in Federated Learning

Hierarchical Knowledge Distillation (HKD) is a recent advancement in machine learning designed to address challenges in federated learning, particularly when dealing with Non-IID data. HKD involves the process of transferring knowledge from a complex model (teacher) to a simpler model (student) in a hierarchical manner. The goal is to improve the performance of models that struggle with data heterogeneity, and it has proven effective in federated learning environments where data is distributed in a decentralized manner.

Understanding Knowledge Distillation

Knowledge distillation (KD) is a technique in machine learning where a smaller model (student) is trained to mimic the predictions of a larger, more complex model (teacher). The student model learns not only from the true labels of the data but also from the teacher's softened output probabilities, which contain valuable information about class relationships and model behavior. This allows the student model to learn more generalized features from the teacher, improving its performance while maintaining a compact model structure.

In the context of federated learning, the knowledge distillation process can be especially beneficial when dealing with heterogeneous data. The central idea is to use a teacher model, typically trained on a global or centralized dataset, to guide local models trained on diverse and non-IID data. The teacher model helps standardize the learning process and provides a form of knowledge transfer that can improve the global model's performance despite data disparities.

Hierarchical Knowledge Distillation (HKD) Explained

Hierarchical Knowledge Distillation builds upon traditional KD by introducing a multi-layered or hierarchical structure. In a federated learning setting, the idea is to leverage multiple teacher-student pairs, where the knowledge is distilled not just from one global teacher to one local student, but through various levels of the hierarchy. These levels correspond to different layers of model complexity or the distribution of knowledge from different sources.

The hierarchical structure involves:

1. **Top-Level Knowledge:** The top level consists of a global teacher model trained on data from multiple clients or a large-scale dataset. This model serves as the “ultimate” teacher that has learned a generalizable representation of the data.
2. **Intermediate-Level Knowledge:** Mid-level models are trained on subsets of the data, either from specific client groups or based on certain types of data distributions. These

models act as intermediate teachers, distilling specific knowledge relevant to the data they were trained on.

3. **Local Knowledge:** The local models or clients at the bottom level act as students, learning from both the global teacher and intermediate teachers. These local models may have access to very specific data distributions, such as data from one user or one device.

By using this hierarchical approach, federated learning systems can effectively manage the challenge of data heterogeneity. Each local model benefits from knowledge distilled at different hierarchical levels, which helps bridge the gap between clients with diverse data.

Benefits of Hierarchical Knowledge Distillation in FL

The application of Hierarchical Knowledge Distillation in federated learning brings several key benefits, particularly in managing Non-IID data:

- **Improved Generalization:** By leveraging multiple levels of knowledge, HKD ensures that local models are not only learning from their own data but also from a broader context. This helps improve the generalization ability of the local models, especially in scenarios where individual clients have limited or skewed data.
- **Better Model Convergence:** The hierarchical structure of knowledge distillation encourages smoother convergence. Since local models are guided by intermediate-level and global teacher models, they are more likely to converge to a more optimal solution, even with data heterogeneity.
- **Enhanced Robustness:** Hierarchical Knowledge Distillation provides a mechanism for enhancing model robustness. The knowledge transferred from different layers of the hierarchy helps local models become more resilient to variations in data distributions, reducing the risk of overfitting to noisy or skewed data.
- **Efficient Knowledge Transfer:** The hierarchical structure enables efficient knowledge transfer by focusing on relevant knowledge at each level of the hierarchy. This reduces the complexity of direct teacher-student knowledge transfer between the global model and local models, thus improving communication efficiency in federated learning.

Challenges in Applying Hierarchical Knowledge Distillation

While the benefits of HKD in federated learning are clear, there are several challenges in its application:

1. **Computational Overhead:** The hierarchical approach requires multiple teacher-student pairs at different levels, which can introduce computational overhead. Each level of the hierarchy needs to be trained and maintained, which could be resource-intensive, especially in environments with limited computing power, such as mobile devices.
2. **Coordination and Synchronization:** Since HKD involves multiple layers of models, coordination and synchronization become more complex. The local models need to interact with both intermediate and global teachers, which requires efficient communication strategies to ensure timely updates and consistency across the system.

3. **Data Alignment:** For hierarchical knowledge distillation to be effective, the data used by the intermediate models must align with the data distributions of the local models. If there are large discrepancies in the data across clients, it can reduce the effectiveness of the hierarchical structure and the knowledge transfer process.
4. **Security and Privacy Concerns:** As with any federated learning approach, security and privacy are paramount concerns. Transferring knowledge from multiple models across different levels requires secure aggregation and transmission of model parameters, gradients, or knowledge representations. Ensuring the privacy of user data during this process is critical.

Hierarchical Knowledge Distillation for Non-IID Data in FL

Hierarchical Knowledge Distillation proves to be particularly valuable when applied to Non-IID data in federated learning. The core benefit lies in its ability to address data heterogeneity at different levels. Here's how it works in practice:

- **Intermediate Teachers for Specific Data Distributions:** When data is Non-IID, clients can struggle to learn generalized representations. The use of intermediate-level teachers, trained on specific data subsets, helps guide local models in dealing with the data distribution particular to each client. These intermediate models help distill useful knowledge that is more relevant to the client's data.
 - **Bridging Gaps Between Data Distributions:** By distilling knowledge from global, intermediate, and local models, HKD bridges the gaps between varying data distributions. This ensures that local models are not isolated in learning only from their own biased data, but are exposed to more global patterns learned by higher-level models.
 - **Multi-Level Adaptation:** The hierarchical approach allows local models to adapt to their data at multiple levels. Local models receive knowledge from the global teacher to generalize their predictions, while also adapting to the specifics of their local data through the intermediate teachers. This multi-level adaptation improves the overall robustness and convergence of federated learning models in the face of Non-IID data.
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5. Optimizing Federated Learning for Non-IID Data with Hierarchical Knowledge Distillation

Optimizing federated learning (FL) for Non-IID data, particularly with the introduction of Hierarchical Knowledge Distillation (HKD), represents a significant step forward in overcoming the challenges posed by heterogeneous data distributions. By leveraging the power of multi-level knowledge transfer, HKD can enhance model performance, convergence rates, and overall robustness across diverse clients with non-uniform data characteristics.

Optimization Strategies

To optimize federated learning for Non-IID data, several strategies can be combined with HKD to achieve superior performance. These strategies work in tandem with the hierarchical structure of knowledge distillation, ensuring that the federated model adapts effectively to varying client data distributions.

Federated Averaging with Hierarchical Updates

One of the key strategies is the use of federated averaging, where updates from each client are aggregated to form a global model. In the context of HKD, federated averaging can be enhanced by applying hierarchical updates that take into account both local and intermediate knowledge. This ensures that the global model is not overwhelmed by data from a single client, allowing for a more balanced aggregation that better represents all clients, even those with unique or underrepresented data.

Adaptive Learning Rates

Another optimization strategy involves adjusting the learning rates of the federated model based on the data distribution of each client. Local models that have more representative or balanced data may receive higher learning rates, while those with more skewed or sparse data may receive smaller adjustments. This approach helps ensure that the global model is learning at an optimal pace, considering the data heterogeneity across clients.

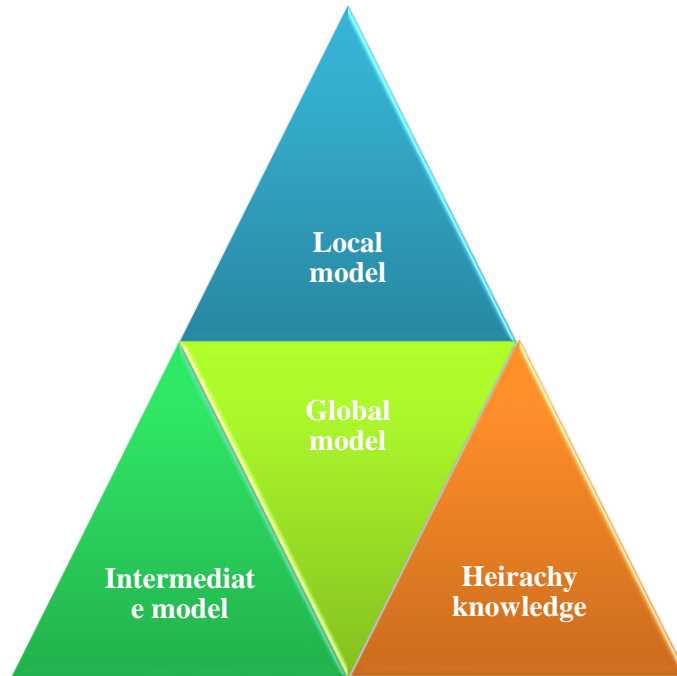
Personalization with Local Adaptation

Personalizing federated models through local adaptation is essential when dealing with Non-IID data. Each client can fine-tune the global model using their unique data, while also benefiting from the knowledge distilled from global and intermediate teachers. This personalized approach allows for better accuracy on each client's data, even when the global model may struggle due to data disparities.

Impact of Optimization Strategies on Federated Learning Performance

Optimization Strategy	Impact on Federated Learning	Effect on Convergence	Effect on Model Accuracy
Federated Averaging with Hierarchical Updates	Balances the contribution of each client's data in the global model	Speeds up convergence and reduces bias	Improves model accuracy on all clients
Adaptive Learning Rates	Adjusts the learning pace based on client data characteristics	Accelerates convergence for well-represented clients	Enhances accuracy for clients with diverse data
Personalization with Local Adaptation	Allows local models to adapt to their own data distribution	Reduces overfitting and enhances robustness	Improves accuracy on specific client data

Federated Learning Optimization Workflow



Conclusion

In conclusion, optimizing federated learning for Non-IID data with Hierarchical Knowledge Distillation offers a promising approach to overcome the challenges posed by heterogeneous data distributions in decentralized environments. By incorporating strategies like federated averaging with hierarchical updates, adaptive learning rates, and personalization, federated learning systems can effectively manage the complexities of data heterogeneity. Furthermore, HKD's ability to transfer knowledge across multiple levels of the hierarchy ensures that local models are better equipped to learn from both local and global data, improving model accuracy, convergence, and robustness.

The continued development and integration of HKD into federated learning models will likely lead to more efficient and accurate systems capable of handling the diverse data present in real-world applications. This optimization not only improves performance across clients but also enhances the scalability and adaptability of federated learning frameworks, making them more suitable for complex, data-intensive tasks in areas such as healthcare, finance, and personalized recommendations.

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