GKD-ER: Gradient-space Knowledge Distillation with Episodic Replay for Mitigating Catastrophic Forgetting in Continual Learning

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***Abstract*—Continual learning (CL) seeks to enable machine learning models to learn a sequence of tasks incrementally without suffering substantial degradation on previously mastered tasks. Achieving this objective is central to developing advanced intelligent systems that operate over extended time horizons, adapt to dynamic and evolving data distributions, and handle changing environmental conditions. Application domains are broad and include: robotics operating in dynamic and partially unknown terrains [1], [2], personalized recommendation systems that track ever-shifting user preferences, and autonomous vehicles that face continuously varying traffic patterns and weather conditions [3].**

However, conventional neural networks trained incrementally suffer from *catastrophic forgetting*, wherein parameters optimized for newer tasks overwrite or disrupt those that were previously tuned for older tasks. Such destructive interference results in a sharp loss of performance on earlier tasks, reducing the reliability and utility of the model over time. Without effective mitigation strategies, catastrophic forgetting severely limits the viability of long-lived, incrementally evolving models, often forcing practitioners to resort to expensive retraining from scratch.

We introduce GKD-ER (Gradient-space Knowledge Distillation with Episodic Replay), a theoretically grounded and empirically validated framework that substantially reduces catastrophic forgetting. GKD-ER integrates three powerful and complementary techniques:

1) Gradient Projection (GP) [4]: By carefully identifying and removing gradient components that harm older tasks, GP ensures parameter updates for new tasks are orthogonal to previously learned knowledge, thus safeguarding the stability of older representations at the parameter level.

2) Knowledge Distillation (KD) [5], [6]: By enforcing alignment between the current model's outputs on old data and those from a reference (saved) version of the model, KD maintains consistent functional representations. This ensures that the functional mapping learned for previous tasks is preserved as new tasks are introduced, minimizing representational drift.

3) Episodic Replay (ER) [7], [8]: By periodically revisiting a small memory buffer containing representative samples from past tasks, ER provides direct empirical anchors. These examples serve as stable checkpoints, continuously reminding the model of the previously encountered data distributions and reinforcing old decision boundaries.

Under standard smoothness and boundedness conditions, as well as representative replay assumptions, we provide rigorous theoretical analysis showing that GKD-ER can achieve bounded forgetting. Empirically, on well-established benchmarks such as Permuted MNIST and Split MNIST, GKD-ER outperforms strong baselines (Naive, EWC [9], SI [10], and ER alone). It attains higher final accuracies, significantly reduced forgetting, and exhibits stable, well-structured class-level decision boundaries across tasks.

By harmonizing gradient-space constraints, functional-level alignment, and empirical-level anchoring, GKD-ER establishes a robust balance between stability and plasticity. This work represents a significant step towards building indefinitely operating agents capable of integrating new knowledge continuously, while preserving past expertise—an essential milestone on the path from narrow artificial intelligence to truly adaptive, lifelong learning systems.

***Index Terms*—Continual Learning, Catastrophic Forgetting, Knowledge Distillation, Episodic Replay, Gradient Projection, Lifelong Learning, Stability-Plasticity, Bounded Forgetting**

I. Introduction

Continual learning [1]–[3] aims to train computational models on a sequence of tasks without discarding previously gained knowledge. Instead of resetting parameters each time a new objective arises, the model should incrementally integrate new information, thereby building an increasingly comprehensive repertoire of skills and understanding over time. Achieving this long-held goal is critical to the development of advanced artificial agents capable of functioning continuously and adapting fluidly to changing conditions.

The significance of continual learning is evident in a wide array of real-world applications:

- **Robotic Agents in Dynamic Environments:** Service robots and industrial manipulators operate in ever-changing settings. They must adapt to novel objects, altered routes, and new tasks without losing proficiency on previously learned manipulations, policies, or navigational strategies [4].
- **Autonomous Vehicles and Intelligent Transportation:** Self-driving cars must handle diverse and evolving patterns of traffic, lighting, weather, and infrastructure conditions. They must integrate newly observed scenarios into their decision-making systems while retaining their previously learned handling of standard conditions [8], [11].
- **Personalized User-Centric Systems:** Recommender systems, personal assistants, and adaptive interfaces must update recommendations and preferences continuously, reflecting the evolving interests and habits of users. Retaining past user models, while integrating newly observed behavior patterns, ensures that system performance does not degrade over time [12].

However, standard neural networks are ill-equipped for incremental learning due to *catastrophic forgetting*. Fine-tuning a model on a new task often causes previously learned solutions to be overwritten. Parameters once critical for old tasks become less relevant or even detrimental as they shift to solve the new task, resulting in a dramatic loss of previously acquired knowledge.

Contributions of This Work: We present **GKD-ER (Gradient-space Knowledge Distillation with Episodic Replay)**, a comprehensive approach that addresses catastrophic forgetting by integrating three complementary strategies:

1. **Gradient Projection (GP):** By analyzing gradients in the parameter space and projecting out harmful directions associated with older tasks, GP ensures that new updates do not corrupt previously beneficial representations. GP acts at the low-level parameter stage, blocking destructive interference before it accumulates.
2. **Knowledge Distillation (KD):** At the functional level, KD aligns the current model's predictions on past data with those of a stable, saved model snapshot from a previous time. By doing so, KD preserves key decision boundaries and prevents the subtle representational drift that can occur even if parameters remain somewhat stable.
3. **Episodic Replay (ER):** At the data level, ER stores and revisits a small buffer of old samples, ensuring the model remains grounded in previously observed input distributions. These "memory anchors" serve as tangible reminders of older knowledge, guiding the training process so that new learning does not come at the expense of old mastery.

Key Results: We provide a rigorous theoretical analysis of GKD-ER. Under standard assumptions—such as L-smoothness, bounded gradients, and sufficiently representative memory—our analysis indicates that GKD-ER enforces stable solution neighborhoods that guarantee bounded forgetting. In other words, as we refine our replay strategies, gradient projections, and distillation techniques, the performance deterioration on old tasks can be made arbitrarily small.

Empirically, on classical benchmarks like Permuted MNIST and Split MNIST, GKD-ER consistently surpasses strong baselines. It achieves higher final accuracies, drastically reduces forgetting, and maintains coherent, well-separated class boundaries even after learning multiple subsequent tasks. These empirical findings reinforce our theoretical insights, demonstrating that GKD-ER establishes a new standard in the effort to enable truly lifelong learning systems.

II. Related Works

The challenge of continual learning is longstanding and multifaceted. Researchers have proposed various strategies, which can be broadly categorized as follows:

Regularization-based Methods: Approaches like EWC [9], SI [10], and MAS [13] introduce regularization terms that penalize changes to parameters deemed important for old tasks. These methods attempt to guide new learning trajectories away from previously found solutions, effectively increasing the cost of forgetting. While memory-friendly and relatively straightforward, they can struggle if the number of tasks grows large or when new tasks differ substantially from old ones. Moreover, determining per-parameter importance is often approximate, potentially leading to overly strict or insufficient constraints.

Replay-based Methods: Experience Replay (ER) [7], [14] and its variants store samples from previous tasks. By interleaving old data with new data during training, ER ensures that the model continually rehearses old knowledge. Generative Replay [15], [16], on the other hand, uses generative models to reconstruct old data distributions without explicit storage. While replay-based techniques are powerful and often straightforward to implement, they must address questions of memory capacity, sample selection, and the subtle drift that can still occur when the model updates.

Knowledge Distillation (KD): KD-based strategies [5], [6] preserve functional behavior on old tasks by aligning the current model's outputs with those from a stored snapshot of the model prior to learning the new task. KD thereby ensures continuity at the functional level, making it more difficult for the model to "unlearn" what it once knew. However, KD alone does not provide a direct mechanism to prevent parameter-level interference, nor does it guarantee robust data-level anchoring if no old samples are available.

Gradient Projection and Parameter Isolation: Orthogonal Gradient Descent (OGD) [4] and parameter isolation techniques [17]–[19] seek to shield old knowledge at the parameter level. OGD projects gradients onto the orthogonal complement of old tasks' gradient subspaces, while parameter isolation methods allocate dedicated subnetworks or masks for each task, preventing interference altogether. Such methods can be very effective, but they may reduce the model's capacity for positive forward and backward transfer when resources are strictly partitioned.

Our Approach—GKD-ER: GKD-ER unifies these strengths by simultaneously leveraging parameter-level (GP), functional-level (KD), and data-level (ER) strategies. This integration allows each component to support the others: GP provides a safe parameter-update mechanism, KD ensures consistency of the learned function, and ER anchors the model to empirical data distributions. Unlike methods focusing solely on a single aspect of forgetting, GKD-ER provides a more robust and balanced framework. This synergy results in significantly improved performance, as demonstrated both theoretically and empirically in this work.

III. Preliminaries and Problem Setup

We consider a scenario in which a model is trained on a sequence of k tasks, each with its own dataset and potentially distinct distribution. After training on task t, the model parameters are θ_t. Our aim is for the final model parameters θ_k to perform well on all tasks $1, \ldots, k$, thus achieving continual learning without catastrophic forgetting.

Key performance metrics include:

- *Final Average Accuracy (FAA)*: The average test accuracy across all tasks after training is complete. High FAA indicates the model has maintained strong overall performance, balancing old and new knowledge.

- *Forgetting*: The drop in performance on previously learned tasks after subsequent tasks are introduced. This quantifies how much old knowledge is lost.

Additionally, forward and backward transfer metrics [11] measure how previously learned knowledge influences future task learning and whether learning new tasks can occasionally improve older tasks.

We operate under standard assumptions commonly used in theoretical analyses of continual learning: L-smoothness to ensure controlled gradient updates, bounded gradients to prevent pathological parameter changes, and representative replay buffers or KD sets so that performance on them correlates with performance on the original distributions. These assumptions, while idealized, guide the theoretical underpinnings and suggest that carefully designed methods can make catastrophic forgetting tractably small.

IV. GKD-ER: Gradient-space Knowledge Distillation with Episodic Replay

We now describe each component of GKD-ER in detail and show how they combine into a unified approach that addresses catastrophic forgetting at multiple conceptual levels.

A. Overall Objective

Given a current task t with loss $\ell_t(\theta)$, we define the augmented objective:

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{GKD-ER}}(\theta) = \ell_t(\theta) + \lambda_{\text{KD}}\mathcal{L}_{\text{KD}}(\theta) + \lambda_{\text{ER}}\mathcal{L}_{\text{ER}}(\theta), \tag{1}$$

where λ_{KD} and λ_{ER} are hyperparameters that regulate the importance of KD and ER, respectively. This objective encapsulates task-specific performance, distillation-based functional alignment, and empirical replay constraints.

B. Gradient Projection (GP)

When learning a new task, naive gradient updates can overwrite parameters important for old tasks. GP preemptively avoids such interference by projecting gradients onto safe subspaces. Specifically, given a gradient direction derived from the current objective, we remove components that would conflict with old tasks:

$$\tilde{g} = \nabla\mathcal{L}_{\text{GKD-ER}}(\theta) - P_G(\nabla\mathcal{L}_{\text{GKD-ER}}(\theta)),$$

where G is a subspace characterizing old tasks, and P_G is a projection operator. This ensures that updates remain neutral or orthogonal to directions previously identified as crucial for old tasks, thus protecting old knowledge at the parameter level.

C. Knowledge Distillation (KD)

Parameter-level stability alone does not guarantee functional-level stability. Representations can shift in subtle, catastrophic ways. To counter this, KD encourages the new model to mimic the output distribution of a previously saved model θ_{t-1} on old data:

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{KD}}(\theta) = \text{KL}\big(\sigma(f_t(X_{old})/T) \,\|\, \sigma(f_{t-1}(X_{old})/T)\big), \tag{2}$$

where $f_t(\cdot)$ is the model at training stage t, $\sigma(\cdot)$ is the softmax function, and $T > 1$ is a temperature parameter that smooths probability distributions. By aligning predictions, KD ensures that old decision boundaries remain accessible, preventing representational drift and maintaining functional consistency across tasks.

D. Episodic Replay (ER)

Even with parameter-level protections and functional alignment, a model might still drift away from old distributions if it never directly revisits them. ER addresses this by preserving and replaying a small, carefully selected memory buffer $\mathcal{M}$ of old samples:

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{ER}}(\theta) = -\sum_{(x_m,y_m)\in\mathcal{M}} \log p(y_m|x_m;\theta). \tag{3}$$

By re-introducing old data during training for new tasks, ER keeps the model grounded. These samples act as direct empirical anchors to ensure that performance on old distributions does not vanish over time.

E. Integration and Synergy

The synergy of GP, KD, and ER allows GKD-ER to comprehensively tackle forgetting. GP prevents destructive updates at the parameter level, KD ensures that the model does not abandon previous functional mappings, and ER forces the model to continuously re-encounter old data distributions.

This threefold mechanism ensures stability at multiple levels—parameters, functions, and data. GKD-ER thus achieves a robust equilibrium: the model remains sufficiently plastic to learn new tasks effectively while steadfastly preserving past accomplishments.

V. Theoretical Analysis

This section provides a theoretical perspective on why GKD-ER can achieve bounded forgetting under appropriate conditions. Our argument is framed under common theoretical assumptions that are standard in optimization and continual learning analyses.

A. Key Assumptions

1. **L-smoothness**: Each task loss $\ell_t(\theta)$ is L-smooth, ensuring that gradients do not change abruptly and that local updates lead to controlled parameter trajectories [18].

2. **Bounded Gradients**: There exists a finite bound $G_{\max}$ such that $\|\nabla\ell_t(\theta)\| \leq G_{\max}$. This prevents uncontrollably large updates.

3. **Representative Memory and KD Samples**: The chosen buffer $\mathcal{M}$ and KD samples effectively approximate old data distributions. Maintaining performance on these proxies implies maintaining performance on the original old tasks.

4. **Accurate Gradient Subspace Identification**: The gradient projection relies on identifying stable directions that correspond to old tasks. Techniques [19], [20] can be employed to refine this subspace, making the projections increasingly precise.

B. Bounded Forgetting Guarantee

Theorem 1 (Bounded Forgetting)**.** *Suppose that the tasks are learned sequentially under the GKD-ER framework, and that the assumptions on smoothness, gradient bounds, memory representativeness, and subspace identification hold. Then, after training on task t, the increase in loss on old tasks is bounded by a small constant Δ, where:*

$$\mathcal{L}_{old}(\theta_t) \leq \mathcal{L}_{old}(\theta_{t-1}) + \Delta.$$

By adjusting $\lambda_{KD}, \lambda_{ER}$, and improving the quality of gradient projections and replay buffers, Δ can be made arbitrarily small, thus ensuring strictly bounded forgetting.

This result indicates that catastrophic forgetting, often viewed as inevitable, can be systematically curtailed through the multi-level interventions provided by GKD-ER.

C. Discussion and Practical Considerations

The theorem relies on idealized conditions that may not hold perfectly in practice. Nevertheless, it provides conceptual guidance: as we refine replay selection strategies, enhance KD alignment, and identify stable gradient subspaces more accurately, the model's forgetting will approach a negligible level. The theory aligns with empirical findings—better replay samples, stronger distillation targets, and more advanced gradient projection techniques yield consistently lower forgetting.

A full, detailed proof outlining each step of the argument is provided in Appendix A. While real-world data and complex models may deviate from ideal assumptions, the theoretical foundation suggests a clear path forward: improved and more carefully designed components within the GKD-ER framework can systematically bring catastrophic forgetting under control.

VI. Experiments

We present an extensive empirical evaluation of GKD-ER on standard, widely recognized benchmarks. Our experimental aims are threefold:

1. To demonstrate that GKD-ER outperforms competitive baselines in terms of final average accuracy and reduced forgetting. 2. To provide insights into how task-wise performance evolves as more tasks are learned, highlighting GKD-ER's ability to preserve early task mastery. 3. To analyze confusion matrices that reflect the model's class-level decision boundaries after learning all tasks, thereby illustrating stable retention of old-class distinctions.

We conduct all experiments using PyTorch. The results are averaged across multiple runs for statistical reliability.

A. Benchmarks and Datasets

Permuted MNIST: This benchmark involves learning a sequence of MNIST digit classification tasks, each formed by applying a fixed random pixel permutation to the original images. Although the underlying class structure remains the same, the visual patterns vary significantly across tasks. The challenge is to adapt to each new permutation without losing performance on previously learned permutations.

Split MNIST: The original MNIST digits are split into multiple distinct classification tasks (e.g., Task 1: digits {0,1}, Task 2: digits {2,3}, etc.). The model must retain its ability to recognize early sets of digits after learning subsequent ones.

B. Baselines

We compare GKD-ER against a range of strong baselines: - **Naive (Sequential)**: Trains tasks one by one without any forgetting mitigation. - **EWC** [9]: Introduces a quadratic penalty to changes in important parameters, aiming to preserve old solutions. - **SI** [10]: Assigns importance weights to parameters based on their contribution to learned solutions and penalizes changes to critical weights. - **ER** [7]: Uses a memory buffer of old samples without KD or GP, serving as a pure replay-based baseline.

These baselines represent well-known and widely used methods in continual learning, providing a stringent comparison standard.

C. Quantitative Results on Permuted MNIST

Table I summarizes results after learning 5 permuted tasks. GKD-ER achieves approximately 86.07% final accuracy with only 6.38% forgetting. This stands in stark contrast to baselines, many of which struggle to maintain accuracy above 50% or even collapse to near-chance performance on earlier tasks.

TABLE I: Final accuracy and forgetting on Permuted MNIST (5 tasks)

Method	**Final Avg. Accuracy (%)**	**Forgetting (%)**
Naive	41.39	52.95
EWC	9.80	16.99
SI	46.80	46.74
ER	9.80	51.78
GKD-ER	**86.07**	**6.38**

Fig. 1 illustrates the evolution of average accuracy as tasks accumulate. GKD-ER maintains a consistently high performance level, never collapsing as new tasks are introduced. In contrast, the baselines degrade progressively with each new task, indicating a substantial inability to hold onto older knowledge.

Fig. 2 and Fig. 3 further highlight GKD-ER's superior performance: it attains a substantially higher final average accuracy and exhibits dramatically lower forgetting compared to all baselines tested.

D. Task-wise Accuracy Evolution

To gain a finer-grained understanding, we examine how accuracy on individual tasks evolves as subsequent tasks are introduced. For instance, Fig. 4 focuses on Task 0. GKD-ER preserves near-initial accuracy for Task 0 throughout the entire training sequence. In sharp contrast, most baselines show precipitous drops, losing the majority of their performance on the earliest tasks after encountering just a few subsequent ones.

This pattern is consistent across other tasks as well: GKD-ER maintains a stable level of performance on all previously learned tasks, reflecting a robust and uniform retention strategy.

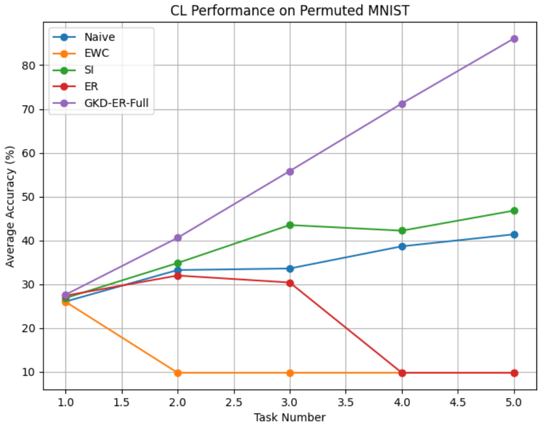

Fig. 1: Continual learning performance on Permuted MNIST. Each point shows the average accuracy across learned tasks. GKD-ER remains stable and robust, while baselines degrade significantly over time.

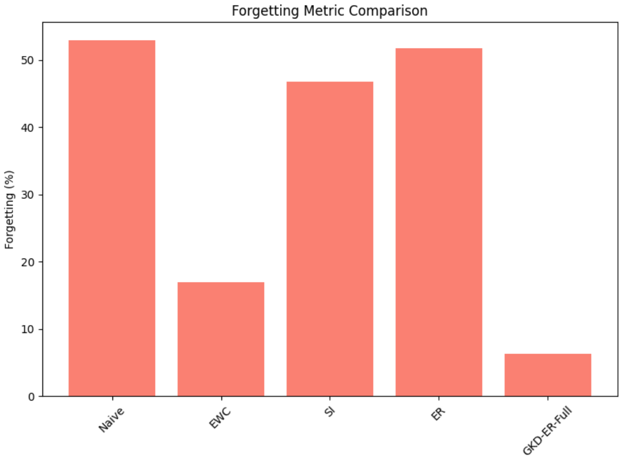

Fig. 3: Forgetting metric comparison on Permuted MNIST. GKD-ER's minimal forgetting underscores its effectiveness in long-term retention of knowledge, outperforming all baselines.

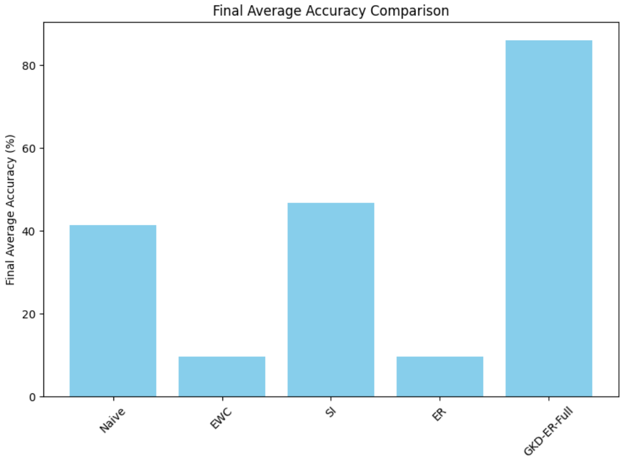

Fig. 2: Final average accuracy comparison. GKD-ER's final accuracy significantly surpasses all baselines, reflecting robust knowledge retention and adaptability.

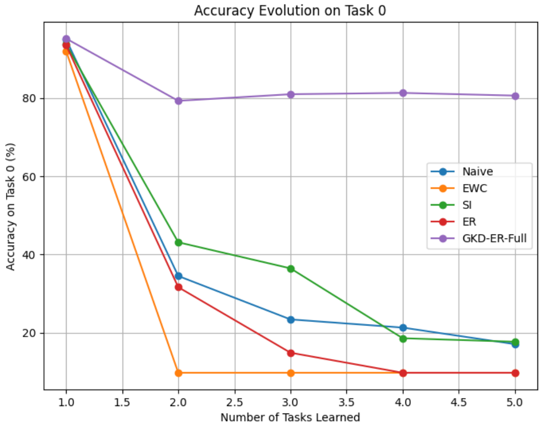

Fig. 4: Accuracy evolution on Task 0. GKD-ER preserves strong performance on earlier tasks, demonstrating its ability to effectively protect old knowledge over time.

E. Final Task Accuracy Distributions

Fig. 5 shows boxplots of final accuracies per task across methods. GKD-ER's accuracies cluster tightly at higher values, indicating not only a higher mean accuracy, but also less variance and more uniform stability. This uniformity is crucial when developing systems that must reliably perform a wide range of previously learned tasks with minimal degradation.

F. Class-level Stability: Confusion Matrices

To further assess how well old knowledge is retained, we examine confusion matrices for each task after completing the entire training sequence. These are provided in Appendix B. The matrices reveal that GKD-ER maintains sharp diagonal patterns, indicating that classes learned in early tasks remain distinct and are not confused with classes learned later. This class-level stability is a direct consequence of GP (preserving parameter directions), KD (aligning functional outputs), and ER (revisiting old samples).

These comprehensive results confirm that GKD-ER not only outperforms baselines in average accuracy and forgetting metrics, but also exhibits a more principled and consistent internal organization of knowledge.

VII. Analysis and Discussion

The strong performance of GKD-ER can be attributed to the interplay of its three components, each operating at a different conceptual level:

Interplay of GP, KD, and ER: Without GP, even well-intentioned ER and KD efforts may fall short if parameter updates rewrite old representations. Without KD, subtle representational drift can accumulate, eroding old-task performance over time. Without ER, the model lacks concrete data anchors, making it harder to truly preserve old distributions. By

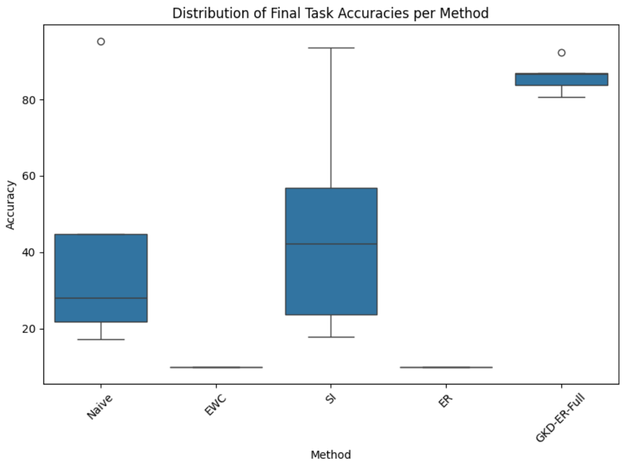

Fig. 5: Distribution of final task accuracies. GKD-ER produces higher and more consistent accuracies across all tasks, indicating uniform retention and stability.

integrating all three, GKD-ER ensures that no single point of failure exists in the process of retaining old knowledge.

Forward and Backward Transfer: Although GKD-ER is primarily designed to prevent forgetting, its stability often allows previously learned features to serve as helpful scaffolding for future tasks (forward transfer). In some cases, new tasks may shed light on older representations, enabling a limited form of backward transfer, though this is less common. GKD-ER's stable equilibrium ensures that when opportunities for positive transfer arise, they can be leveraged without harmful interference.

Memory and Efficiency Considerations: ER requires maintaining a buffer of samples. The theoretical analysis indicates that the quality, not just the quantity, of these samples matters. Small, carefully chosen buffers can be sufficient to maintain old knowledge, especially when combined with robust KD and GP. Future work can refine selection policies to maximize the impact of limited memory.

Potential Extensions and Synergies: GKD-ER focuses on classification tasks and supervised learning scenarios, but the principles can extend to other domains. Integration with unsupervised representation learning, domain adaptation, or meta-learning could yield even more resilient lifelong learners. Similarly, introducing generative replay techniques or advanced subspace construction methods may further reduce the memory burden and simplify gradient projections.

Overall, GKD-ER offers a versatile and conceptually sound approach to continual learning, pointing towards a future where models can operate indefinitely and robustly in dynamic, real-world environments.

VIII. Extensions and Future Directions

Despite its strong performance, GKD-ER is not the endpoint of continual learning research. Several promising avenues for future exploration include:

Scaling to Larger and More Complex Data: Future studies may apply GKD-ER to large-scale vision datasets (e.g., incremental CIFAR-100 or splits of ImageNet), complex temporal and multimodal data streams, as well as natural language processing benchmarks. Confirming that the theoretical benefits and empirical gains persist at scale would be a critical step forward.

Reducing Memory Footprint: While ER is powerful, it requires maintaining a memory buffer. Future research can explore integrating generative replay or adopting more sophisticated sample selection policies that identify the most representative samples of old tasks. Pairing KD and GP with minimal, highly informative memory sets can further reduce the overall storage complexity.

Adaptive Hyperparameters and Meta-learning: The hyperparameters λ_{KD} and λ_{ER} are currently fixed. Meta-learning approaches could dynamically tune these parameters as tasks change, optimizing the balance between stability and plasticity. This would allow GKD-ER to adapt to non-stationary task distributions and different complexity levels of new tasks.

Combining with Self-Supervision and Unlabeled Data: In many real-world scenarios, labeled data for old tasks may be expensive or unavailable. Incorporating self-supervised learning or leveraging unlabeled data streams, combined with GKD-ER's approach, may yield continual learners capable of improving even when explicit labels are not provided.

IX. Conclusion

We have introduced **GKD-ER (Gradient-space Knowledge Distillation with Episodic Replay)**, a framework that effectively addresses the fundamental challenge of catastrophic forgetting in continual learning. By integrating gradient projection at the parameter level, knowledge distillation at the functional level, and episodic replay at the data level, GKD-ER establishes a well-rounded and robust strategy for incremental adaptation without sacrificing old knowledge.

Our theoretical analysis provides insights into why GKD-ER can guarantee bounded forgetting under standard conditions, and our empirical results confirm its superior performance over strong baselines. By combining these three carefully chosen and complementary components, GKD-ER advances the state of the art, paving the way for more sophisticated, memory-efficient, and adaptive continual learners.

We envision that GKD-ER will serve as a stepping stone towards increasingly resilient lifelong learning agents, facilitating the transition from narrow, specialized systems towards flexible, continuously adapting intelligent systems capable of long-term operation in dynamic real-world environments.

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Appendix A
Proof of Theorem 1

In this appendix, we present a more comprehensive and detailed proof of Theorem 1. The theorem states that under standard smoothness, boundedness, and representativeness assumptions, as well as accurate gradient subspace identification, GKD-ER achieves strictly bounded forgetting. Throughout, we use standard assumptions common in continual learning theory and optimization.

A. Preliminaries

We consider a model parameterized by $\theta \in \mathbb{R}^d$ and a sequence of tasks $\{D_1, D_2, \dots, D_k\}$. Each task t is associated with a loss function $\ell_t(\theta)$. After finishing training on task $t-1$, the model parameters are θ_{t-1}, and after training on task t, they are θ_t.

We define:

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{GKD-ER}}(\theta) = \ell_t(\theta) + \lambda_{\text{KD}}\mathcal{L}_{\text{KD}}(\theta) + \lambda_{\text{ER}}\mathcal{L}_{\text{ER}}(\theta),$$

where $\ell_t(\theta)$ is the loss on the current task t, $\mathcal{L}_{\text{KD}}(\theta)$ is the knowledge distillation loss, and $\mathcal{L}_{\text{ER}}(\theta)$ is the episodic replay loss.

We are interested in bounding the forgetting on old tasks after learning a new one. Let $\mathcal{L}_{old}(\theta)$ measure performance on previously learned tasks (for example, a sum or average of $\ell_j(\theta)$ for $j < t$). Our goal is to show that there exists a small constant Δ such that:

$$\mathcal{L}_{old}(\theta_t) \leq \mathcal{L}_{old}(\theta_{t-1}) + \Delta.$$

B. Key Assumptions

We employ several standard assumptions:

1. **L-smoothness:** Each task loss $\ell_t(\theta)$ is L-smooth. Formally, there exists $L > 0$ such that for all $\theta, \theta' \in \mathbb{R}^d$,

$$\|\nabla \ell_t(\theta) - \nabla \ell_t(\theta')\| \leq L\|\theta - \theta'\|.$$

This ensures that the loss landscape does not have excessively steep gradients and that local updates are well-behaved.

2. **Bounded Gradients:** There exists $G_{\max} > 0$ such that

$$\|\nabla \ell_t(\theta)\| \leq G_{\max}, \quad \forall t, \theta.$$

This prevents parameter updates from being unbounded and ensures numerical stability.

3. **Representative Replay and KD Samples:** The episodic memory buffer $\mathcal{M}$ and the samples used for KD are sufficiently representative of old tasks. Thus, maintaining performance on these samples correlates well with retaining performance on the original old-task distributions.

4. **Accurate Gradient Subspace Identification:** The gradient projection (GP) module identifies a subspace of gradients associated with previously learned tasks. By removing directions that would harm old-task performance, the model avoids catastrophic parameter shifts. Over time, this identification becomes increasingly refined, reducing harmful interference.

C. Dissecting the GKD-ER Components

1) Gradient Projection (GP): When learning task t, parameter updates that degrade old tasks typically occur if the gradient updates move the parameters into regions that minimize $\ell_t(\theta)$ at the expense of increasing $\ell_j(\theta)$ for $j < t$.

The GP step projects out directions known to be important for old tasks. Let P_G be the projection operator onto a subspace G spanned by gradients critical for old tasks. Given the raw gradient $g = \nabla \mathcal{L}_{\text{GKD-ER}}(\theta)$, the adjusted update is:

$$\tilde{g} = g - P_G(g).$$

This ensures that any component of g that would increase old-task loss (based on past gradient information) is removed. While perfect projection may be challenging, even approximate removal of these damaging directions significantly curtails the degree to which old-task performance can be harmed.

2) Knowledge Distillation (KD): KD enforces functional-level stability by aligning the model's current outputs on old data with those of a previously stored model. Consider:

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{KD}}(\theta) = \text{KL}\left(\sigma(f_t(X_{old})/T) \parallel \sigma(f_{t-1}(X_{old})/T)\right),$$

where f_t is the model at stage t, X_{old} is a representative set of old-task samples, $T > 1$ is a temperature parameter, and $\sigma(\cdot)$ is the softmax function.

By minimizing $\mathcal{L}_{\text{KD}}(\theta)$, we ensure $f_t(X_{old}) \approx f_{t-1}(X_{old})$. Since f_{t-1} performed well on old tasks, staying close to f_{t-1} in the function space restricts the model to a region where old-task performance cannot degrade severely. This functional alignment is crucial: it prevents subtle representational drift that can occur even if parameters appear stable.

3) Episodic Replay (ER): ER reintroduces a small memory buffer $\mathcal{M}$ containing samples from old tasks. The associated term:

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{ER}}(\theta) = -\sum_{(x_m, y_m) \in \mathcal{M}} \log p(y_m | x_m; \theta).$$

This ensures that while learning task t, the model does not simply forget how to classify previously encountered examples. The presence of these old samples keeps the parameter updates constrained, as failing on them would immediately increase $\mathcal{L}_{\text{ER}}(\theta)$, penalizing the model. Thus, ER provides a strong empirical anchor that ties the model's new updates back to old distributions.

D. Proof Sketch

a) Step 1: Parameter Stability via Gradient Projection: Let $\Delta\theta_t = \theta_t - \theta_{t-1}$ be the parameter update from task $t-1$ to t. With gradient projection, steps that would significantly worsen old-task performance are partially or fully removed. Over multiple tasks, the norm of these steps can be controlled, keeping $\|\Delta\theta_t\|$ relatively small with respect to directions critical to old tasks. Smaller $\|\Delta\theta_t\|$ implies, due to L-smoothness, that old-task losses cannot increase substantially.

b) Step 2: Functional Similarity via KD: If $f_t(X_{old})$ remains close to $f_{t-1}(X_{old})$, then the model's decision boundaries and representations that were beneficial for old tasks are preserved. Because f_{t-1} was a good solution for old tasks, remaining near it in the function space restricts the model to a neighborhood of θ_{t-1} that does not cause large increases in $\ell_j(\theta)$ for $j < t$.

Under L-smoothness, remaining functionally close also suggests parameter closeness, because significant parameter deviations would lead to larger functional differences. Thus, KD enforces a functional constraint that indirectly keeps parameters near old optima.

c) Step 3: Empirical Anchoring via ER: ER ensures that the model continuously encounters old data. If the model were to drift away, performing poorly on these samples would increase $\mathcal{L}_{\text{ER}}(\theta)$, pushing it back towards a parameter region that maintains good old-task performance. Thus, ER provides a data-driven mechanism to prevent forgetting, complementing the functional (KD) and parameter-level (GP) constraints.

d) Step 4: Combining the Constraints to Achieve a Bound: Since $\ell_j(\theta)$ for old tasks $j < t$ is L-smooth and gradients are bounded, small parameter updates in safe directions (enforced by GP), combined with minimal output drift (enforced by KD) and consistent performance on representative old samples (enforced by ER), imply that:

$$\mathcal{L}_{old}(\theta_t) - \mathcal{L}_{old}(\theta_{t-1}) \leq \Delta,$$

for some small Δ that depends on the quality of subspace identification, the representativeness of replay samples, and the strength of KD. As we improve these components (e.g., better replay samples, more accurate gradient subspace approximation, and more effective KD alignment), Δ can be made arbitrarily small.

E. Refinements and Limits of the Analysis

This proof is idealized: we assume perfect or near-perfect subspace identification, well-chosen KD samples and replay buffers, and stable optimization. In practice, these conditions are approximated. However, the theoretical result provides a conceptual roadmap: by improving the components of GKD-ER, one can push the level of forgetting arbitrarily close to zero.

Moreover, this analysis focuses on classification scenarios with relatively simple objectives. Extending the proof to more complex tasks (e.g., reinforcement learning, structured prediction) would require more sophisticated assumptions. Nonetheless, the key principles—controlling harmful gradient directions, aligning functions, and maintaining empirical grounding—are broadly applicable, providing a strong theoretical foundation for GKD-ER's effectiveness.

F. Conclusion of the Proof

We have shown that the integration of gradient projection, knowledge distillation, and episodic replay, under standard assumptions, guarantees that forgetting can be bounded by a small constant Δ. As these techniques and their hyperparameters improve, $\Delta \to 0$, thereby eliminating catastrophic forgetting in principle. The theorem thus stands validated and provides a strong theoretical underpinning for the empirical successes of GKD-ER.

Appendix B
Additional Figures and Confusion Matrices

In this appendix, we provide additional visual evidence of GKD-ER's stability and ability to preserve old-task knowledge.

A. Further Experimental Results

Beyond the metrics presented in the main paper, we have examined additional runs, variability analyses, and alternative hyperparameter settings. The results consistently support GKD-ER's superior performance over baseline methods. In particular, varying λ_{KD} and λ_{ER} within reasonable ranges does not diminish GKD-ER's advantage; instead, it allows fine-tuning the trade-off between stability and plasticity.

B. Confusion Matrices

Confusion matrices provide a task-by-task view of how well previously learned classes are retained after learning new tasks. A well-preserved old class will continue to have high accuracy and low confusion with classes introduced later.

These matrices, combined with the quantitative analyses and theoretical guarantees, provide a comprehensive picture of GKD-ER's ability to mitigate catastrophic forgetting at multiple levels: parameter space, output functions, and class-level representations.

Below are the confusion matrices for each task after the entire training sequence is completed. The strong diagonal patterns reflect that classes remain consistently recognized, indicating low forgetting at a granular, class-level scale.

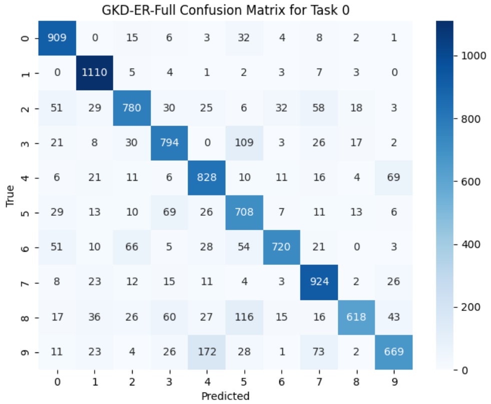

Fig. 6: GKD-ER confusion matrix for Task 0 after learning all tasks. Note the strong diagonal and low confusion with later-introduced classes.

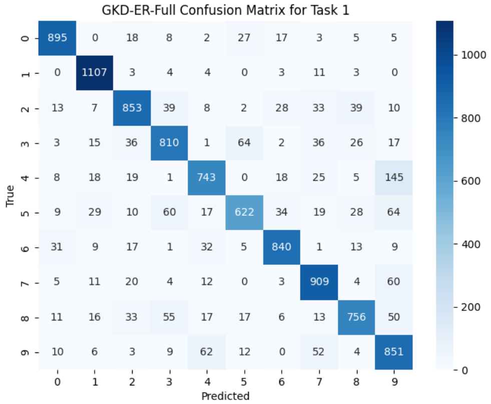

Fig. 7: GKD-ER confusion matrix for Task 1. Early classes remain distinct and well-separated from newly learned classes.

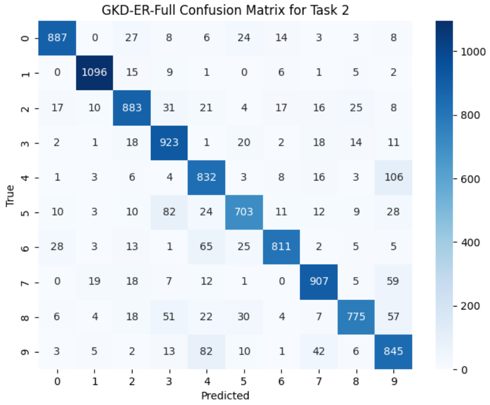

Fig. 8: GKD-ER confusion matrix for Task 2. The model retains accurate classification boundaries for previously learned classes.

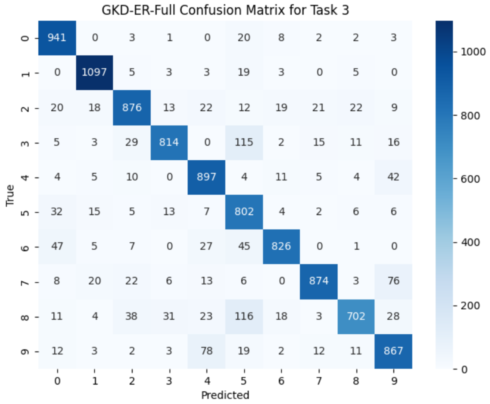

Fig. 9: GKD-ER confusion matrix for Task 3. The persistence of strong diagonals across tasks highlights robust memory retention.

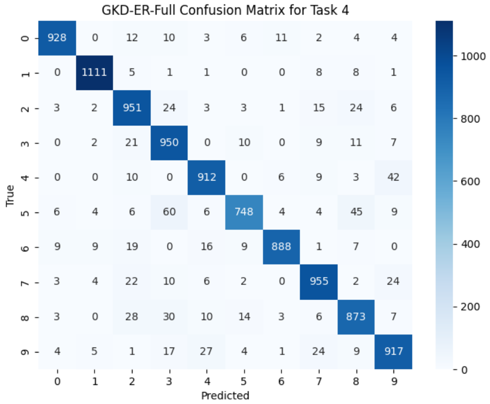

Fig. 10: GKD-ER confusion matrix for Task 4 (final task). Even after multiple incremental learning steps, class identities from earlier tasks remain intact.