



Iterative Pseudo-Labeling for Speech Recognition

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Abstract

Pseudo-labeling has recently shown promise in end-to-end automatic speech recognition (ASR). We study Iterative Pseudo-Labeling (IPL), a semi-supervised algorithm which efficiently performs multiple iterations of pseudo-labeling on unlabeled data as the acoustic model evolves. In particular, IPL fine tunes an existing model at each iteration using both labeled data and a subset of unlabeled data. We study the main components of IPL: decoding with a language model and data augmentation. We then demonstrate the effectiveness of IPL by achieving state-of-the-art word-error rate on the LIBRISPEECH test sets in both standard and low-resource setting. We also study the effect of language models trained on different corpora to show IPL can effectively utilize additional text. Finally, we release a new large in-domain text corpus which does not overlap with the LIBRISPEECH training transcriptions to foster research in low-resource, semi-supervised ASR.

Index Terms: speech recognition, language modeling, pseudo-labeling, semi-supervised learning, deep learning

1. Introduction

Recent advances in end-to-end speech recognition are largely due to acoustic model (AM) architecture improvements. Some of the most promising are from the Transformer family [1, 2, 3, 4, 5], which give state-of-the-art results on many ASR benchmarks and close the gap between end-to-end and hybrid systems. Given the performance gain from new architectures, research has shifted focus towards leveraging self- and semi-supervised techniques to better-utilize unlabeled data. For example, pseudo-labeling (PL) successfully boosts the performance on LIBRISPEECH [6] baselines by a large margin [1]. Many algorithms exist which incorporate unlabelled data to improve ASR in the low-resource setting, including CPC [7, 8], pseudo-labeling [9], local prior matching [10], pseudo-label augmentation [11], adversarial training [12] and back translation [13]. While many of these methods outperform a supervised baseline with limited resources, a large gap to fully-supervised training remains. Furthermore, not all approaches scale easily to large amounts of data, such as that recently used in the LIBRILIGHT benchmark [7].

In this work, we study iterative pseudo-labeling (IPL), a straightforward method that can easily scale to large unlabeled datasets and further boost the performance in both standard- and low-resource settings. IPL is motivated by the simplicity and effectiveness of PL [9, 1]. A simple extension to [1] involves conducting more iterations of PL as the model trains so as to continuously refine and improve the quality of generated pseudo-labels. That said, training a model from scratch after each round of PL and relabeling a large collection of unlabeled data is expensive. IPL mitigates these challenges by 1) labeling only a subset of the unlabeled data in each iteration, and 2) fine tuning the existing model on this subset, rather than training from scratch. An intuitive motivation for this is shown in Figure 1, where the same

AM is trained to convergence with a fixed learning rate; both settings reach a similar WER. Training from scratch with PL is also shown to be roughly equivalent to iterating in a machine translation setting [14].

2. Related Work

Semi-supervision in ASR is well-studied [15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20]; our work builds primarily on recent work with end-to-end systems, especially PL [9, 1]. In [9], PL is shown to be effective with only 100h of labeled audio. However, the model uses a sequence-to-sequence loss and requires additional pseudo-label filtering to achieve the best results. To mitigate the instability found in sequence-to-sequence decoding, as in [1] all pseudo-labels are generated with models trained with Connectionist Temporal Classification (CTC) loss [21]. Our work extends [1] by conducting more rounds of PL and fine tuning the existing model and demonstrates the effectiveness of the IPL approach in settings with both 960h and 100h of labeled audio. Still other work [8] learns discrete audio feature representations directly from the waveform and works quite well with limited data, even in settings with under 100h of labeled audio. In this setting, learned acoustic features are presumably more competitive than an AM trained end-to-end with MFCC or log-mel filterbank features. Other works including [10], those with CPC baselines [7], and those using adversarial training [12], and back-translation-style techniques [13] also provide promising end-to-end semi-supervised approaches, but results are not comparable as newer end-to-end approaches outperform these works' baselines.

3. Method

In this section, we first introduce the iterative pseudo-labeling algorithm (IPL). Then we give theoretical justifications why IPL facilitates effective training. Finally, we perform analysis and experiments on a small-scale labeled dataset.

3.1. Iterative Pseudo-Labeling

As listed in Algorithm 1, IPL utilizes both labeled and unlabeled data as in the conventional semi-supervised learning. The model minimizes the following loss function:

$$\mathcal{L} = \mathcal{L}_L + \lambda \mathcal{L}_U \tag{1}$$

where \mathcal{L}_L and \mathcal{L}_U denote the parts of the loss function on labeled and unlabeled data accordingly:

$$\mathcal{L}_L = -\mathbb{E}_{\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y} \sim p(\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y})} \log(p_\theta(\mathbf{y}|\mathbf{x})) \tag{2}$$

$$\mathcal{L}_U = -\mathbb{E}_{\mathbf{x} \sim p(\mathbf{x})} \mathbb{E}_{\hat{\mathbf{y}} \sim p_\theta(\mathbf{y}|\mathbf{x})} \log(p_\theta(\hat{\mathbf{y}}|\mathbf{x})). \tag{3}$$

Note that in ASR, instead of sampling from $p_\theta(\mathbf{y}|\mathbf{x})$, the transcriptions as well as the pseudo-labels are usually selected from the greedy path:

$$\hat{\mathbf{y}} = \underset{\mathbf{y}}{\operatorname{argmax}} p_\theta(\mathbf{y}|\mathbf{x}). \tag{4}$$

Algorithm 1: Iterative pseudo-labeling

Data: Labeled data $L = \{x_i, y_i\}_{i=1}^l$
Unlabeled data $U = \{x'_j\}_{j=1}^u$
Result: Acoustic model p_θ
Initialize p_θ by training on only labeled data L ;
repeat
 1. Draw a subset of unpaired data $\tilde{U} \in U$;
 2. Apply p_θ and beam-search decoding with LM to the subset \tilde{U} to generate $\hat{U} = \{(x, \hat{y}) | x \in \tilde{U}\}$;
 3. Fine tune p_θ on $L \cup \hat{U}$ with data augmentation;
until convergence or maximum iterations are reached;

3.2. Avoidance of Local Minima

As discussed in [14], one bane of loss (1) optimization in fine tuning is that it tends to get stuck at a local minima after each round of training with existing pseudo-labels; the conditional log likelihood (3) is already maximized when $p_\theta(\mathbf{y}|\mathbf{x})$ matches the underlying data distribution $p_{\theta^*}(\mathbf{y}|\mathbf{x})$, so that $\nabla_{\theta} \mathcal{L}|_{\theta=\theta^*} = 0$. This could explain why in PL approach a model is trained from scratch with newly generated pseudo-labels. To overcome this behaviour the IPL algorithm has two distinct effective components: one with respect to the target (\mathbf{y}) and the other with respect to the data (\mathbf{x}).

External Language Model (LM) In modern ASR systems, in addition to the acoustic model p_θ , a decoding procedure (typically either WFST-based [22] or beam-search-based (BS) [23, 24]) integrates an external language model (LM). With beam-search decoding, instead of using the greedy path (4) as transcriptions, we consider:

$$\hat{\mathbf{y}}' = \underset{\mathbf{y}}{\operatorname{argmax}} \log p_\theta(\mathbf{y}|\mathbf{x}) + \alpha \log p_{\text{LM}}(\mathbf{y}) + \beta |\mathbf{y}|, \quad (5)$$

where α and β are hyper-parameters [1] usually optimized on validation set. This differs $\hat{\mathbf{y}}'$ from $\hat{\mathbf{y}}$ by introducing extra LM knowledge into transcriptions so that the learned weights θ are no longer optimal given the new labels $\hat{\mathbf{y}}'$, and the model will keep training with $\nabla_{\theta} \mathcal{L}|_{\theta \neq \theta^*} \neq 0$. This is also observed in machine translation [14], where the gain from using greedy-path decoding is limited in self-training with PL.

Data Augmentation With respect to data, when data augmentation is introduced, the log likelihood the model optimizes also changes. We can rewrite (3) as

$$\mathcal{L}_U = -\mathbb{E}_{\mathbf{x} \sim p(\mathbf{x}), \mathbf{x}' \sim q(\mathbf{x}'|\mathbf{x})} \mathbb{E}_{\hat{\mathbf{y}} \sim p_\theta(\mathbf{y}|\mathbf{x})} \log(p_\theta(\hat{\mathbf{y}}|\mathbf{x}')), \quad (6)$$

where $q(\cdot)$ is the data augmentation function, which is SpecAugment [25] in our experiments. The model weights optimized before could be no longer optimal given the new augmented input; the model keeps updating with $\nabla_{\theta} \mathcal{L}|_{\theta \neq \theta^*} \neq 0$.

Empirical Study We use `train-clean-100` and `train-clean-360` in LIBRISPEECH as labeled and unlabeled training data and `dev-other` as a validation set. The AMs detailed in Section 4.3, are first trained on labeled data for 100 epochs ($\approx 10^4$ hours) and then continue with IPL. Pseudo-labeling is performed every 10 epochs with all unlabeled data without down-sampling. The learning rate is fixed throughout training for a fair comparison. As shown in Figure 2, if both data augmentation and LM decoding are used, there is a dramatic WER drop when unlabeled data is first in use, and the WER keeps decreasing as IPL progresses. If either data augmentation or LM decoding is removed, convergence degrades noticeably.

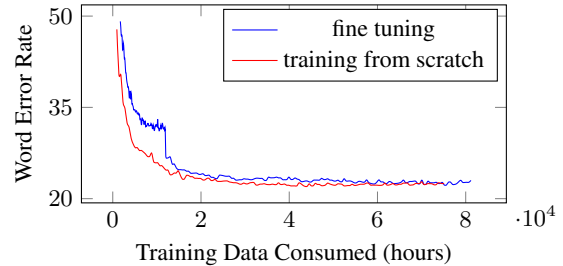


Figure 1: WER on `dev-other` for two different strategies of using the unlabeled data. In fine tuning, the model is first trained on `train-clean-100` only for 160 epochs and then used to generate pseudo-labels on `train-clean-360`. Both `train-clean-100` and `train-clean-360` are then used to fine tune the same model. In “from scratch training”, same pseudo-labels on `train-clean-360` together with the true labels on `train-clean-100` are used to train a new model with the same architecture from scratch.

Further, if both are removed, adding unlabeled data provides no benefit to IPL, which is in consistent with hitting local minima. One should note that the model is not fully converged at epoch 100; the WER continues decreasing. The contribution of the beam search alone is also limited.

3.3. Dataset Distribution Approximation

Usually, unlabeled set U is much larger than the labeled one L ; it is very time-consuming to label the entire U in each round of PL. However, if insufficient data is selected in each round the $p(\mathbf{x})$ in (3) will be poorly estimated, which will increase the chance of model overfitting. To balance the trade-off between the accuracy of $p(\mathbf{x})$ approximation and the PL efficiency, with the same setup as in Section 3.2, we conduct an empirical ablation where the PL is performed only on a randomly sampled subset of U . Note that samples from L and U are treated equally following [1], so that the λ in (1) is implicitly set to $|U|/|L|$, the ratio between the number of samples in the two sets.

As shown in Figure 3, even though there is an up to 5-time

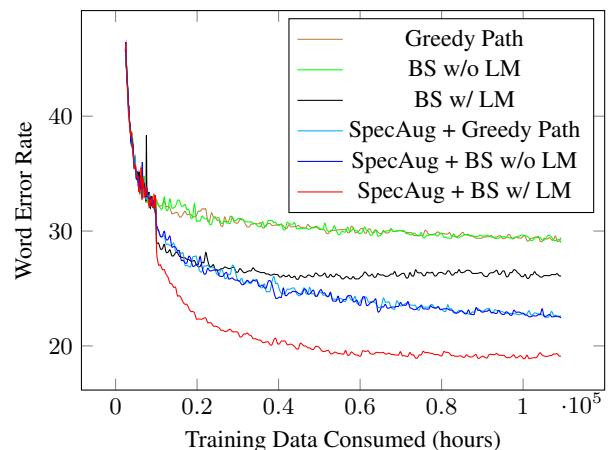


Figure 2: WER on `dev-other` with different IPL training strategies. Beam-search (BS) decoding is performed with an 4-gram LM.

Table 1: Comparison of WER with other semi-supervised methods on LIBRISPEECH (LS) and LIBRIVOX (LV) data. The beam-search decoding with 4-gram $LS \setminus LV$ LM is used in IPL training for pseudo-labels generation. LM column refers either to the greedy path (“-”) or to the final decoding and rescoring (“**”) with external LMs.

Method	Data (hours)		LM	Dev WER		Test WER	
	Labeled	Unlabeled		clean	other	clean	other
Adversarial training [12]	LS-100	LS-860 (text)	NN	15.3	-	15.8	-
Semi-supervision with PL [9]	LS-100	LS-360	GCNN	5.37	22.13	5.93	24.07
Local Prior Matching [10]	LS-100	LS-860	GCNN	4.87	13.84	4.88	15.28
vq-wav2vec + BERT [8]	LS-100	LS-860	4-gram	4.0	10.9	4.5	12.1
Semi-supervision with PL, CTC [1]	LS-960	LV-54K	GCNN + Transf.*	2.01	3.95	2.31	4.54
Semi-supervision with PL, S2S [1]	LS-960	LV-54K	GCNN WP + Transf.*	2.00	3.65	2.09	4.11
Ours, IPL	LS-100	LS-860	-	5.69	10.69	6.15	11.48
	LS-100	LS-860	4-gram + Transf.*	5.00	8.72	5.37	9.51
	LS-100	LS-860 + LV-54K	-	4.35	7.90	5.07	8.84
	LS-100	LS-860 + LV-54K	4-gram + Transf.*	3.19	6.14	3.72	7.11
Ours, IPL	LS-960	LV-54K	-	2.05	4.12	2.21	4.71
	LS-960	LV-54K	4-gram + Transf.*	1.85	3.26	2.10	4.01

gap in λ , using 20% to 40% of U can reach the same WER as using 100%. This motivates us to 1) pay less attention to λ tuning and 2) down sample U in PL, so as to perform more rounds of PL in total to better utilize large unlabeled set. On the other hand, using only 10% from U significantly hurts the convergence, which shows the importance of $p(\mathbf{x})$ approximation and sets up a lower bound of down-sample rate.

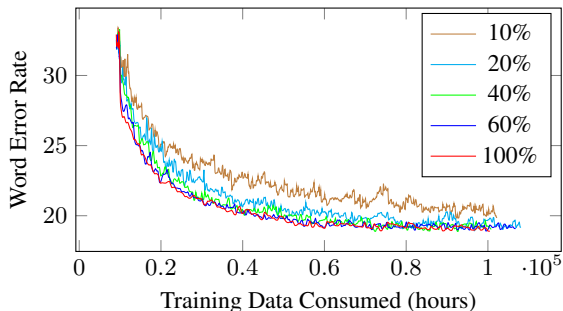


Figure 3: WER on dev-other with different amount of unlabeled data used in each iteration of IPL training (data augmentation and BS decoding with LM are applied).

4. Experiments

4.1. Audio Data

Audio data for our experiments comes from two sources: LIBRISPEECH, containing 960h of audio and paired transcriptions, and audio from LIBRIVOX (54K hours of audio) extracted following [7]. Two setups of labeled data are used: either all of LIBRISPEECH or only its train-clean-100 subset. We use the standard development (for all hyper-parameters optimization) and test (for final evaluation only) sets from LIBRISPEECH.

4.2. Gutenberg Text Corpus

As discussed in [9], it is important to remove components of the LM training corpus that overlap with unlabeled audio to ensure the LM has no information about ground truth transcriptions

from the unlabeled audio. We study the contribution of the LM to IPL and conduct rigorous experiments when a subset of LIBRISPEECH is used as unlabeled audio. For LM training, we prepare a larger in-domain text corpus using books from Project Gutenberg [26]. To prepare the corpus, we first start with a large subset of English books from Project Gutenberg (which includes some of the 14.5k books present in the LIBRISPEECH LM corpus [6] with 0.8B words) and filter out all books present in LIBRIVOX audio data. We perform the same procedure as in [1] along with a manual matching step to find exact or similar titles (after normalization) in LIBRIVOX (α, β are the same as in [1]), filtering out the resulting books. Similarly, we remove from the corpus books present in the LIBRISPEECH validation and test sets. The resulting filtered corpus is normalized in the same way as in [1] which mimics the normalization in the LIBRISPEECH corpus, but has additional mappings of some abbreviations and does not split text mid-sentence. We denote this final corpus as $GB \setminus LV$ (2.16B words from 34k books). Further, with the same procedure, we filter out books containing LIBRISPEECH training transcriptions (960h) and form a new corpus denoted as $GB \setminus LV \setminus LS$ (2.11B words from 33.4k books).

4.3. Models

Acoustic Model We use the best-performing Transformer architecture on LIBRISPEECH and LIBRIVOX with 322M parameters from [1] in our experiments. In particular, there is a convolutional front-end containing 6 layers of 1-D convolutions with kernel width 3 followed by 36 4-head Transformer blocks [27] with self-attention dimension 768. The 2nd, 4th and the final convolutions in the front-end have stride 2, so the overall subsampling rate of the model is 8. The AMs take 80 log-mel filterbanks as input and are trained end-to-end with CTC loss.

Language Model For fair comparison with existing works, IPL experiments in Table 1 use BS decoding with the 4-gram LM (200k top words) used in [1], which is trained on the official LIBRISPEECH LM corpus with transcriptions in LIBRIVOX excluded, denoted as $LS \setminus LV$. Also we are using Transformer LM from [1]. As an ablation study, we train 5-gram LMs on $GB \setminus LV \setminus LS$ and $GB \setminus LV$ with top 200k words in each and without pruning using the KenLM toolkit [28]. The LMs

perplexities are listed in Table 2.

Table 2: Perplexities of language models.

Data	$LS \setminus LV$	$GB \setminus LV \setminus LS$	$GB \setminus LV$	Transf.
dev-clean	161.7	101.6	99.7	48.2
dev-other	152.5	112.9	110.5	50.2

4.4. Model Training

We use word pieces (WP) [29] as modeling units in our experiments. Following [1], we use the same 10k WP computed from the training transcriptions, if the whole LIBRISPEECH training set is used. If only `train-clean-100` is in use, we switch to the 5k WP estimated on `train-clean-100` transcriptions as in [10]. We use a lexicon, including words only in training and validation sets, to limit the search space of the BS decoding in IPL. Dropout [30] and layer drop [31] are tuned and used to regularize each model. For models that are not trained on LIBRIVOX, we set both dropout and layer drop to 0.3; for models trained on LIBRIVOX, layer drop is set to 0.2 while dropout is 0.2 and 0.15 for models using 100 and 960 hours labeled data, respectively. All models are trained on 64 GPUs with a batch size of 4 per GPU if using LIBRIVOX and 6 otherwise. We use the Adagrad [32] optimizer; the learning rate is initialized to 0.03 and is never decreased for models trained on LIBRIVOX but is halved once at epoch 800 for LIBRISPEECH-only models.

In terms of IPL training, we implemented the automated pipeline in `wav2letter++` [23]. We use random search with 256 jobs to optimize the hyper-parameters in BS decoding [24] with n -grams LM on `dev-other` and use the optimal values in the subsequent PL. As mentioned in Section 3.3, we only select 20% to 40% of the data in each round of PL if LIBRIVOX is the unlabeled dataset. Otherwise, if the rest of LIBRISPEECH is the unlabeled set, the entire unlabeled set is pseudo-labeled. Pseudo-labels are regenerated every 10 epochs.

4.5. Results and Analysis

In this section we compare our results with other recent works in semi-supervised learning. All results are listed in Table 1. Given `train-clean-100` as labeled data, our method reaches 9.51% and 7.11% on `test-other` with the rest of LIBRISPEECH and LIBRIVOX as unlabeled data, respectively. If all of LIBRISPEECH is used as labeled data, we achieve 4.01% on `test-other`. Our result achieves a clear state-of-the-art in all the three semi-supervised learning setups.

Effectiveness We conduct 3 rounds of pseudo labeling on the entire unlabeled set and retraining a new AM from scratch. As shown in Table 3, WER on `dev-other` decreases with better PL generated, but the marginal gain diminishes as iterations continue. IPL, however, clearly outperforms the 3 rounds PL baseline, indicating it is effective to accumulate gains through training with more (up to 80) rounds of PL updates.

Efficiency Given the same amount of time for 3 rounds of PL training in Table 3 to finish, which is 4, 11 and 17 days from top to bottom, IPL achieves WER 10.69%, 8.50% and 4.14%, respectively. To achieve the same WER after round 3, however, IPL takes only 0.7, 3.3 and 8 days. This efficiency derives directly from the two proposed changes in IPL: 1) fine tuning the existing model with new labels to save computation in re-bootstrapping and 2) down sampling the unlabeled set to shorten the PL time, i.e. 20% down-sample rate leads to 5 time speed up in labeling.

Table 3: WER of greedy path on `dev-other` for IPL and training from scratch for multiple rounds. 4-gram $LS \setminus LV$ LM is used for pseudo-labels generation.

Data		Rounds of PL				Iterative PL
Labeled	Unlabeled	0	1	2	3	
LS-100	LS-860	27.76	17.1	15.8	15.09	10.69
LS-100	LS + LV	27.76	16.3	12.9	10.95	7.90
LS-960	LV-54K	7.31	5.00	4.69	4.57	4.12

Table 4: IPL training with different LMs in BS decoding. WER on `dev-other` (`test-other`) is reported for the greedy path (top), an extra BS decoding with the same n -grams LM used in IPL training (middle) and Transformer LM rescoring (bottom).

Data		Language Model		
Labeled	Unlabeled	$LS \setminus LV$	$GB \setminus LV \setminus LS$	$GB \setminus LV$
LS-100	LS-860	10.69 (11.48)	10.80 (11.61)	10.19 (11.09)
LS-100	LS + LV	7.90 (8.84)	7.21 (8.28)	6.82 (7.89)
LS-960	LV-54K	4.12 (4.71)	-	4.02 (4.42)
LS-100	LS-860	10.05 (10.90)	9.82 (10.49)	9.09 (9.82)
LS-100	LS + LV	7.21 (8.19)	6.70 (7.74)	6.15 (7.35)
LS-960	LV-54K	3.67 (4.33)	-	3.65 (4.10)
LS-100	LS-860	8.72 (9.51)	8.90 (9.67)	8.25 (9.11)
LS-100	LS + LV	6.14 (7.11)	5.96 (6.99)	5.56 (6.71)
LS-960	LV-54K	3.26 (4.01)	-	3.42 (3.83)

LM Study Comparison of IPL with different LMs is shown in Table 4 with LMs perplexities in Table 2. Given a better LM, IPL better transfers LM knowledge into AM and achieves better performance. IPL can thus effectively leverage large amount of unpaired text, in addition to unpaired audio. However, although the difference in perplexity between the $GB \setminus LV$ and $GB \setminus LV \setminus LS$ LMs is small, there is still a large gap in WER. This is because the LM implicitly leaks the labels of unlabeled audio. Fortunately, comparing WER between $LS \setminus LV$ and $GB \setminus LV \setminus LS$, when the transcription leaking is completely removed, it is still possible to reach similar (or even better) WER by utilizing more in-domain text.

Decoding Parameters Mismatch As shown in Table 4, there is still an observable improvement in WER across greedy path and the BS decoding with n -grams LM. One inhibitor to transferring LM knowledge into the AM is a mismatch in decoding parameters: the parameters optimized on `dev-other` may not be optimal for decoding unlabeled audio. Thus, in the final stage of IPL training, the marginal WER improvement on `dev-other` is not reflected similarly on the one on unlabeled audio, so as to prevent the AM from improving.

5. Conclusion

We have shown that iterative pseudo-labeling can give superior results in both standard and low-resource settings and provides an efficient algorithm with which to train as compared to conventional pseudo-labeling approaches. Iterative pseudo-labeling benefits from beam search decoding with a language model and data augmentation along with dataset sub-sampling which also improves efficiency. With our Transformer acoustic model, IPL achieves the state-of-the-art results on LIBRISPEECH test sets.

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