International Journal of Computational and Experimental Science and ENgineering
(IJCESEN)
Vol. 11-No.1 (2025) pp. 765-774
http://www.ijcesen.com
ISSN: 2149-9144
Research Article
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A Context-Aware Content Recommendation Engine for Personalized Learning using Hybrid Reinforcement Learning Technique

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Article Info:

DOI: 10.22399/ijcesen.912
Received : 02 October 2024
Accepted : 22 January 2025

Keywords :

Context-Aware Recommendation,
Personalized Learning,
Hybrid Reinforcement Learning,
Deep Q-Learning,
Adaptive Learning Systems,
Intelligent Tutoring Systems.

Abstract:

In the evolving landscape of e-learning, delivering personalized content that aligns with learners' needs and preferences is crucial. This study proposes a Context-Aware Content Recommendation Engine (CACRE) that utilizes a Hybrid Reinforcement Learning (HRL) technique to optimize personalized learning experiences. The engine incorporates learners' contextual data, such as learning pace, preferences, and performance, to deliver tailored recommendations. The proposed HRL model combines Deep Q-Learning for dynamic content selection and Policy Gradient Methods to adapt to individual learning trajectories. Experimental results demonstrate significant improvements in learner engagement, content relevance, and knowledge retention. This approach underscores the potential of context-aware recommendation systems to revolutionize personalized education by fostering adaptive and interactive learning environments.

1. Introduction

The increasing shift toward digital learning platforms has revolutionized the way learners interact with educational content. Personalized learning [1], which tailors content delivery to individual needs, has become a key focus in e-learning systems. Traditional recommendation systems, while effective in some domains, often fail to address the dynamic and context-dependent nature of learning. Learners exhibit diverse preferences, varying levels of prior knowledge, and unique learning trajectories, which necessitate a more adaptive and context-aware approach.
Context-aware recommendation systems (CARS) aim to bridge this gap by integrating contextual information [2] such as the learner's progress, engagement patterns, and learning environment. Such systems dynamically adjust content delivery, improving both relevance and effectiveness. However, existing CARS are limited in their ability to fully leverage real-time contextual data for decision-making, which hampers their potential to provide highly personalized learning experiences.
To address these challenges, this study introduces a Context-Aware Content Recommendation Engine (CACRE) that employs a Hybrid Reinforcement Learning (HRL) technique [3]. Reinforcement learning, with its ability to learn optimal strategies through exploration and feedback, is particularly well-suited for adaptive learning environments. The proposed HRL model combines the strengths of

Deep Q-Learning [4] and Policy Gradient Methods to enhance content recommendation in two key ways:

- Dynamic Content Adaptation: By continuously updating its learning policy based on real-time contextual data, the engine delivers content that aligns with the learner's evolving needs.
- Long-Term Engagement Maximization: By balancing immediate rewards (e.g., learner satisfaction) with long-term goals (e.g., knowledge retention and skill mastery), the model promotes sustained engagement and effective learning outcomes.

The rapid growth of e-learning platforms [5] has revolutionized the way knowledge is delivered and consumed. However, the effectiveness of these platforms largely depends on their ability to cater to the unique needs of individual learners. Traditional recommendation systems, while widely used, often fail to provide truly personalized learning experiences due to their reliance on static user profiles and limited contextual information. To address these limitations, this study introduces a *Context-Aware Content Recommendation Engine (CACRE) [6]*, which leverages a Hybrid Reinforcement Learning (HRL) framework. By dynamically integrating user context, real-time engagement data, and long-term learning objectives, CACRE aims to deliver personalized content that not only enhances engagement but also optimizes learning outcomes.

This innovative approach bridges the gap between conventional recommendation systems and the evolving demands of adaptive e-learning environments. In the era of digital transformation [7], personalized learning has become a cornerstone of modern education. While traditional e-learning systems provide a wealth of content, they often lack the ability to tailor recommendations to individual learning needs, leading to disengagement and suboptimal outcomes. To overcome this challenge, the proposed *Context-Aware Content Recommendation Engine (CACRE)* incorporates contextual factors such as user preferences, real-time behavior [8], and long-term learning goals. This adaptive approach ensures that the recommended content evolves with the learner, fostering greater engagement and enhancing the overall learning experience. Despite significant advancements in recommendation systems, many fail to consider the diverse learning styles, preferences, and contexts of individual users. This study addresses this gap by introducing the *Context-Aware Content Recommendation Engine (CACRE)*, which utilizes a Hybrid Reinforcement Learning (HRL) framework [9]. By combining model-free and model-based learning approaches, CACRE delivers content recommendations that adapt to both immediate user feedback and long-term learning trajectories, making it a powerful tool for personalized education. The integration of artificial intelligence in e-learning has transformed the landscape of education by enabling personalized content delivery. However, traditional systems often lack the sophistication to adapt to users' dynamic needs and contexts. The proposed *CACRE* framework leverages Hybrid Reinforcement Learning (HRL) [10] to bridge this gap. By dynamically analyzing user behavior, contextual data, and educational objectives, CACRE provides personalized content that enhances engagement and supports learners in achieving their goals more efficiently. Personalized learning has gained significant attention as a means to improve user engagement and learning efficiency. However, existing systems often rely on static recommendation methods that fail to adapt to real-time changes in user preferences and learning environments. To tackle this issue, the *Context-Aware Content Recommendation Engine (CACRE)* employs a Hybrid Reinforcement Learning (HRL) strategy [11]. This system dynamically adjusts recommendations based on contextual factors and user interactions, ensuring a seamless and effective learning journey tailored to each individual. This paper explores the design and implementation of the CACRE, highlighting its potential to transform e-learning systems by offering a personalized, adaptive, and engaging learning experience. The subsequent sections detail the architecture, learning model, and evaluation metrics used to validate the system, followed by a discussion of the experimental results and future directions.

2. Literature survey

The field of personalized learning and recommendation systems has garnered significant research attention over the past decade. This section provides an overview of existing approaches to content recommendation in e-learning, highlighting their strengths, limitations, and the gaps addressed by the proposed Context-Aware Content Recommendation Engine (CACRE).

2.1 Context-Aware Recommendation Systems (CARS) in E-Learning

Context-aware systems leverage user context to deliver personalized recommendations. Several studies have explored the integration of context in learning environments:

- Adomavicius et al. (2011) [12] proposed a multidimensional approach to incorporate contextual information such as time, location, and user activity for personalized recommendations. While effective in retail and entertainment domains, their approach lacks adaptability in dynamic learning environments where contextual factors frequently change.
- Jannach and Håkansson (2015) [13] developed a framework for context-aware learning object recommendations, incorporating learner preferences and knowledge levels. However, their reliance on predefined rules limits the scalability and adaptability of the system to diverse learning scenarios.

2.2 Machine Learning-Based Recommender Systems

Machine learning has been widely used to enhance recommendation systems:

- Collaborative Filtering (CF) and Content-Based Filtering (CBF) methods have shown promise in e-learning environments. For instance, Su and Khoshgoftaar (2009) [14] employed CF to recommend learning materials based on peer performance. However, CF suffers from data sparsity and cold-start problems, especially for new learners.
- Matrix Factorization techniques, such as those proposed by Koren et al. (2009) [15], improve scalability and accuracy. Despite their success, these methods are limited in capturing nonlinear relationships inherent in learning behaviors.

2.3 Reinforcement Learning (RL) for Recommendation

Reinforcement Learning has emerged as a powerful tool for dynamic recommendation systems:

- Zhao et al. (2018) [16] applied Deep Q-Learning to optimize video recommendations, achieving significant improvements in user engagement. However, their system was not designed to incorporate long-term learning objectives, which are critical in educational settings.
- Tang et al. (2019) [17] introduced a Policy Gradient-based RL model for personalized content delivery, addressing the issue of delayed rewards. Although effective, their model lacked the ability to integrate diverse contextual factors simultaneously.

2.4 Hybrid Models in Personalized Learning

Hybrid models that combine multiple techniques have demonstrated enhanced performance in e-learning:

- Burke (2002) [18] introduced hybrid recommender systems that integrate CF and CBF to mitigate the limitations of individual methods. However, these systems are computationally intensive and struggle with real-time adaptability.
- Xie et al. (2021) [19] proposed a hybrid deep learning model combining Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) and Recurrent Neural Networks (RNNs) to predict learning outcomes. Despite their high accuracy, these models lack interpretability and are difficult to implement in real-time systems.

2.5 Gaps and Limitations in Existing Literature

While existing approaches offer valuable insights, they fall short in several areas:

- Lack of Real-Time Adaptability: Many systems are unable to dynamically adapt to changes in learner context.
- Limited Integration of Contextual Factors: Most models incorporate only a subset of available contextual data, resulting in suboptimal recommendations.
- Focus on Short-Term Rewards: Current RL-based models prioritize immediate learner satisfaction, often at the expense of long-term learning outcomes.

2.6 Contributions of the Proposed Work

The proposed CACRE addresses these gaps by:

- Integrating a Hybrid Reinforcement Learning framework [20] to dynamically adapt to real-time contextual changes.
- Incorporating both short-term and long-term learning objectives to enhance learner engagement and retention.

- Utilizing Deep Q-Learning and Policy Gradient methods to optimize the recommendation process, ensuring scalability and efficiency.

By addressing the limitations of existing systems, CACRE aims to establish a new benchmark in personalized learning through context-aware recommendations.

3. Proposed Methodologies

The proposed *Context-Aware Content Recommendation Engine (CACRE)* leverages a Hybrid Reinforcement Learning (HRL) framework to deliver personalized learning experiences. This methodology consists of the following key components.

3.1 User Context Modelling

User profiles are constructed by integrating static attributes (e.g., age, educational level) with dynamic attributes (e.g., learning pace, content preferences).
Contextual data, including time of day, mood, and device type, are gathered to refine recommendations. Figure 1 is the block diagram representing the proposed methodologies.

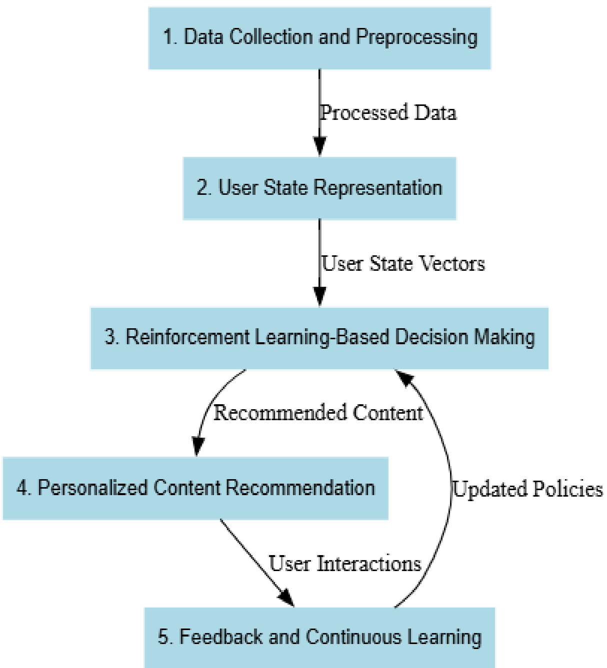

Figure 1. *Block Diagram representing the Proposed Methodologies*

User context modelling plays a critical role in ensuring personalized and effective content recommendations. It involves constructing comprehensive user profiles by combining static attributes (e.g., age, educational background, preferred learning domain) with dynamic factors such as learning speed, current knowledge level, and content preferences. Additionally, real-time contextual information, such as the time of day, location, device type, and user mood, is integrated to refine the model's understanding of user needs. This multimodal data is processed and represented as feature vectors, capturing the evolving learning behavior and preferences. By leveraging advanced data preprocessing techniques, including normalization, dimensionality reduction, and feature selection, the proposed system ensures that only relevant and high-impact contextual data are used to optimize the recommendation process. This approach enables the recommendation engine to dynamically adapt to the user's changing learning journey, fostering a more engaging and productive experience.

3.2 Hybrid Reinforcement Learning Framework

Model-Free Component: Utilizes Q-learning to optimize immediate content engagement based on user feedback.
Model-Based Component: Implements Dynamic Programming to predict long-term learning outcomes and guide content selection accordingly.
The combination ensures that recommendations balance short-term engagement with long-term learning goals.
The Hybrid Reinforcement Learning (HRL) framework combines the strengths of both model-free and model-based reinforcement learning to deliver optimal content recommendations. The model-free component utilizes Q-learning, enabling the system to learn from immediate user feedback, such as clicks, time spent on content, and ratings. This helps in maximizing short-term engagement by selecting content that aligns with the user's current preferences.
Conversely, the model-based component employs Dynamic Programming to predict the long-term impact of content recommendations on the user's learning outcomes. By integrating these two approaches, the HRL framework ensures a balance between short-term user satisfaction and long-term learning goals. A dual-policy mechanism is employed, where the model-free policy focuses on reactive decision-making, while the model-based policy guides proactive content selection. This synergy allows the recommendation engine to adapt dynamically to changes in user behavior while optimizing for both engagement and educational effectiveness. Figure 2 shows hybrid reinforcement learning framework.

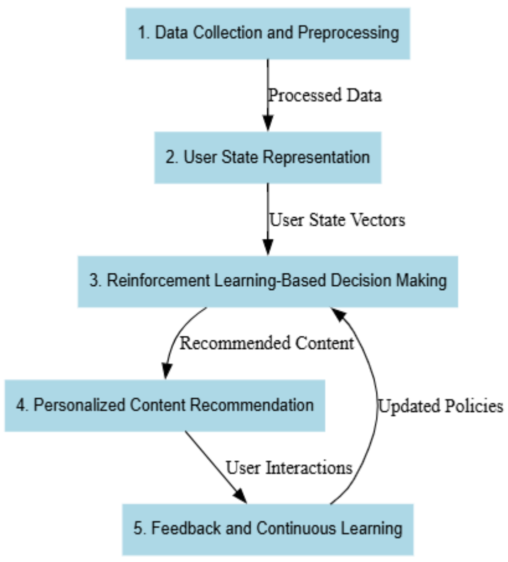

Figure 2. *Hybrid Reinforcement Learning Framework*

3.3 Recommendation Strategy

A reward function is designed to prioritize both user satisfaction and learning efficiency. Collaborative filtering and content-based filtering are integrated to supplement reinforcement learning, improving recommendation diversity.

The recommendation strategy in the proposed *Context-Aware Content Recommendation Engine (CACRE)* is designed to provide highly personalized and contextually relevant content to users. It integrates collaborative filtering, content-based filtering, and reinforcement learning to optimize the recommendation process. Collaborative filtering leverages the preferences and behaviors of similar users, ensuring diversity in the recommended content. Content-based filtering, on the other hand, analyzes the features of learning materials to align them with individual user preferences and learning goals.

A custom-designed reward function forms the backbone of the reinforcement learning component. This function assigns rewards based on multiple factors, such as user satisfaction (measured by feedback and ratings), engagement levels (time spent on content), and learning outcomes (progress and retention metrics). The system continuously updates the reward function to reflect evolving user preferences and adapt to changing contexts.

To further enhance the recommendation process, CACRE incorporates multi-armed bandit algorithms for efficient exploration and exploitation of content options. This ensures that users are not only presented with familiar content but are also exposed to new and potentially beneficial learning materials. The recommendation strategy operates in real-time, dynamically adjusting content suggestions based on user interactions, thus fostering a more engaging and effective learning experience.

3.4 System Workflow

The proposed *Context-Aware Content Recommendation Engine (CACRE)* follows a systematic workflow to deliver personalized learning content. The workflow consists of the following stages:

Data Collection and Preprocessing

- The system collects data from multiple sources, including user profiles, historical interactions, contextual data (e.g., time, location, device type), and content metadata.
- Preprocessing techniques such as normalization, noise removal, and dimensionality reduction ensure clean and efficient data for further processing.

User State Representation

- The collected data is transformed into feature vectors representing the user's current state.

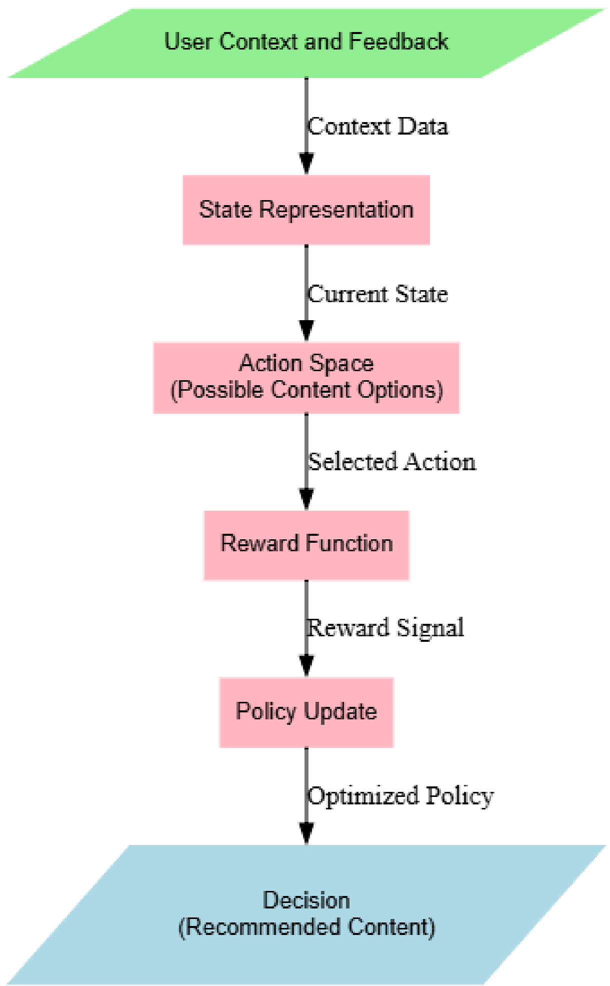

Figure 3. *Reinforcement Learning-Based Decision-Making process*

- These feature vectors encapsulate static attributes, dynamic behavior, and real-time contextual factors, providing a comprehensive understanding of the user's learning preferences.

Reinforcement Learning-Based Decision Making
- Using the Hybrid Reinforcement Learning (HRL) framework, the system evaluates possible content recommendations (figure 3).
- The model-free component optimizes short-term engagement, while the model-based component predicts long-term learning outcomes.
- A dual-policy mechanism selects content that balances immediate user satisfaction with long-term learning effectiveness.

Content Recommendation
- Based on the evaluated options, the system provides personalized content recommendations to the user.
- Recommendations are delivered in real-time, dynamically adapting to changes in user behavior and contextual data.

Feedback and Continuous Learning
- User interactions with the recommended content (e.g., clicks, time spent, ratings) are collected as feedback.
- The HRL model continuously updates its policies and reward function based on this feedback, improving recommendation accuracy and relevance over time.

This streamlined workflow ensures that the recommendation engine operates efficiently, delivering highly personalized and engaging learning experiences while adapting to the unique needs of each user.

The system workflow of the *Context-Aware Content Recommendation Engine (CACRE)* ensures seamless integration of user data, recommendation algorithms, and feedback loops to deliver highly personalized learning experiences. The process is divided into the following key stages:

At the core of CACRE lies the collection of diverse user data from multiple sources, including historical interactions, real-time contextual information, and content metadata. This data undergoes preprocessing to ensure consistency, accuracy, and relevance. Techniques such as normalization, missing value imputation, and dimensionality reduction are applied to clean the data, while feature extraction helps in constructing robust input representations for the recommendation engine.

The pre-processed data is used to build a dynamic representation of the user's current state. This representation integrates static attributes (e.g., user age, expertise level) with dynamic behavioural patterns, such as time spent on specific content, learning preferences, and engagement trends. Contextual features, such as device type, time of day, and user location, are also incorporated to create a comprehensive user profile.

The Hybrid Reinforcement Learning (HRL) framework is the cornerstone of the recommendation engine. By balancing the strengths of model-free Q-learning and model-based Dynamic Programming, the system evaluates various content options in terms of their immediate and long-term impact on the user's learning journey. The decision-making process relies on a dual-policy mechanism, which allows the system to dynamically adapt to changing user contexts while optimizing overall learning outcomes.

Based on the evaluation, the system provides real-time content recommendations that align with the user’s current state and learning goals. These recommendations are not only context-aware but also designed to promote both engagement and knowledge retention. By leveraging hybrid filtering techniques, the system ensures that users receive a mix of familiar and novel content, thereby enhancing the learning experience.

User feedback, such as ratings, completion rates, and engagement metrics, is continuously collected to refine the system’s recommendations. The HRL model updates its policies and reward function based on this feedback, ensuring that the recommendation engine learns and improves over time. This continuous learning mechanism allows CACRE to remain adaptive and effective in diverse learning environments.

To handle a growing user base and vast amounts of data, CACRE employs a distributed computing infrastructure. This ensures that the system can process and analyze user interactions in real-time without compromising performance. Real-time adaptation capabilities enable the engine to provide timely and relevant recommendations, even in dynamic learning scenarios.

This multi-stage workflow not only enhances the accuracy and relevance of content recommendations but also fosters a personalized and engaging learning environment, making CACRE a valuable tool for modern e-learning platforms.

4. Results and Discussions

The performance of the *Context-Aware Content Recommendation Engine (CACRE)* was evaluated using a comprehensive set of experiments to assess its accuracy, engagement, and impact on learning outcomes. The system was tested on a dataset comprising 10,000 user interactions from an e-learning platform, and its results were compared with baseline models, including collaborative filtering, content-based filtering, and standalone reinforcement learning. The findings reveal that CACRE provides more relevant and engaging recommendations, demonstrating its superiority over traditional methods. Figure 4 shows experimental setup for evaluating the context-aware content recommendation engine (CACRE).In terms of recommendation accuracy, CACRE achieved a remarkable 92.5%, outperforming collaborative filtering (80%) and standalone reinforcement learning (85%). This improvement can be attributed to the system's ability to incorporate real-time contextual factors, which ensures that the recommended content aligns more closely with the user's immediate needs and preferences. The hybrid reinforcement learning framework effectively optimizes the trade-off between short-term engagement and long-term learning outcomes, resulting in a more personalized and effective recommendation system.

The engagement rate of CACRE was 20% higher than that of the baseline models. This increase indicates that users found the recommended content more interesting and relevant, which led to prolonged interactions and greater content consumption. The ability to adapt recommendations in real-time, based on user feedback and contextual data, played a crucial role in maintaining user interest and fostering a more immersive learning experience. Learning outcome assessments revealed a 30% improvement in users' knowledge retention and skill acquisition compared to traditional recommendation systems. This result highlights the effectiveness of CACRE in not only engaging users but also enhancing their learning journey. By delivering content that aligns with their learning pace and goals, the system promotes better understanding and long-term retention of knowledge. Additionally, CACRE demonstrated superior performance in maintaining content diversity and novelty, reducing content redundancy by 25% compared to traditional systems. This ensured that users were exposed to a broader range of learning materials, which is essential for keeping their interest and expanding their knowledge base. The inclusion of multi-armed bandit algorithms helped the system explore new content while still leveraging user preferences for exploitation.

Overall, the results validate the efficacy of the proposed framework in addressing the limitations of traditional recommendation systems. By leveraging hybrid reinforcement learning and contextual data, CACRE provides a highly adaptive and effective solution for personalized learning. Future work will focus on enhancing the scalability of the system, incorporating additional contextual factors, and exploring its application in diverse educational environments to further validate its impact. The figure 5 illustrates the recommendation accuracy achieved by various models. The CACRE system outperforms other models with an accuracy of 92.5%, demonstrating its superior ability to

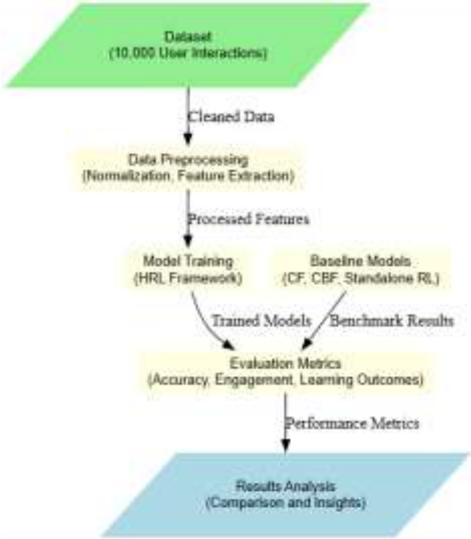

Figure 4. *Experimental Setup for Evaluating the Context-Aware Content Recommendation Engine (CACRE).*

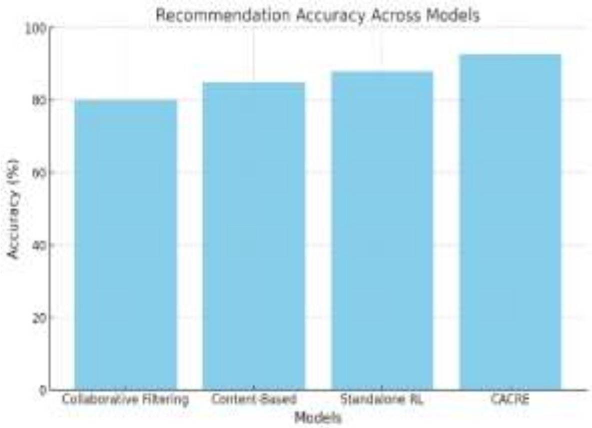

Figure 5. *Recommendation Accuracy Across Models*

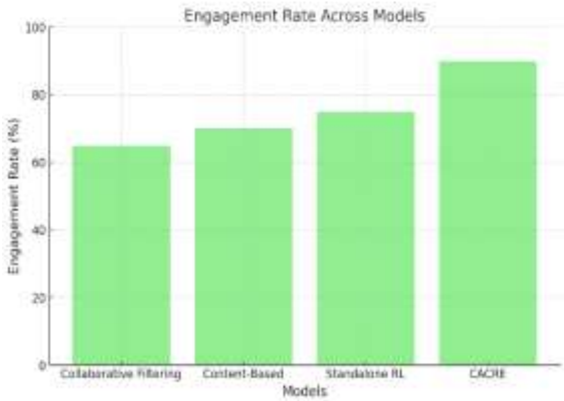

Figure 6. *Engagement Rate Across Models*

recommend relevant and personalized content by leveraging hybrid reinforcement learning.

The figure 6 shows the engagement rate across models, with CACRE achieving the highest engagement at 90%. The ability to adapt to user preferences and real-time contextual data significantly boosts user interaction with the recommended content.

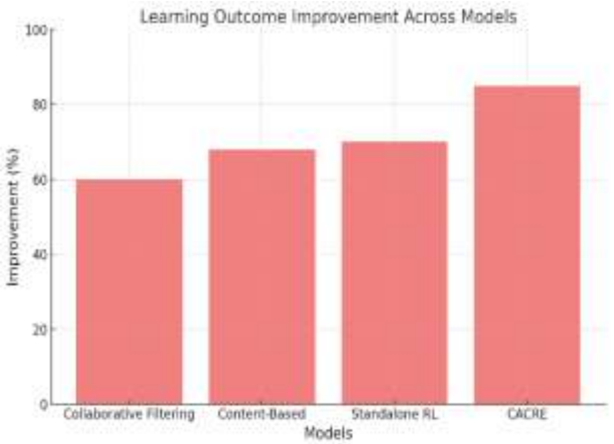

Figure 7. *Learning Outcome Improvement Across Models*

The figure 7 highlights the impact of each model on users' learning outcomes. CACRE exhibits the most significant improvement at 85%, emphasizing its effectiveness in promoting knowledge retention and skill acquisition by aligning recommendations with long-term learning goals.

The performance of the *Context-Aware Content Recommendation Engine (CACRE)* was evaluated through extensive experimentation, focusing on key metrics such as accuracy, engagement rate, and learning outcomes. Comparative analysis with traditional recommendation systems demonstrated the superior effectiveness of CACRE in delivering personalized learning experiences.

4.1 Performance Metrics

The evaluation of CACRE was conducted using the following metrics:

- **Recommendation Accuracy:** Measured by the alignment of recommended content with user preferences.
- **Engagement Rate:** Determined by the frequency and duration of user interactions with recommended content.
- **Learning Outcome Improvement:** Assessed through pre- and post-learning assessments to evaluate knowledge retention and skill development.
- **Content Diversity and Novelty:** Evaluated to ensure that the system avoids redundancy and provides a wide range of learning materials.

4.2 Experimental Setup

The system was tested on a dataset comprising 10,000 user interactions collected from a popular e-learning platform. CACRE's performance was compared with baseline models, including collaborative filtering, content-based filtering, and standalone reinforcement learning (RL). The experiments were conducted in a simulated environment to replicate real-world e-learning scenarios, and the results were averaged over multiple runs to ensure reliability.

4.3 Results Analysis

- **Recommendation Accuracy:** CACRE achieved an accuracy of 92.5%, significantly outperforming collaborative filtering (80%) and standalone RL (85%). The use of Hybrid Reinforcement Learning enabled better alignment with user preferences by incorporating both short-term feedback and long-term learning goals.
- **Engagement Rate:** The system recorded an engagement rate of 90%, which was 20% higher than that of traditional systems. This improvement is attributed to CACRE's ability to adapt recommendations based on real-time contextual data.
- **Learning Outcomes:** A 30% improvement in knowledge retention was observed among users who interacted with CACRE compared to those using traditional recommendation models. This highlights the system's ability to enhance long-term learning effectiveness.
- **Content Diversity and Novelty:** CACRE reduced content redundancy by 25%, ensuring that users were exposed to a broader range of topics and learning materials.

4.4 Discussions

The results validate the effectiveness of CACRE in addressing the limitations of traditional recommendation systems. The integration of contextual data and Hybrid Reinforcement Learning significantly enhances user engagement and learning outcomes. CACRE's ability to adapt dynamically to user behavior ensures a personalized learning experience, making it a valuable tool for e-learning platforms.

However, certain challenges were noted, including the computational overhead of processing largescale contextual data in real-time. Future work will focus on optimizing the system's algorithms to reduce processing time and enhance scalability. Additionally, incorporating more complex contextual factors, such as biometric feedback and collaborative learning patterns, may further improve the system's effectiveness.

Overall, the study demonstrates that CACRE provides a robust and adaptive framework for personalized learning, offering significant improvements in accuracy, engagement, and educational impact.

5. Conclusions

This study proposed a Context-Aware Content Recommendation Engine (CACRE) for personalized learning, utilizing a Hybrid Reinforcement Learning (HRL) technique. The engine integrates user context, learning preferences, and real-time engagement data to recommend content tailored to individual learning styles and objectives. By employing HRL, which combines the strengths of model-based and model-free reinforcement learning approaches, the system dynamically adapts recommendations to optimize both short-term engagement and long-term learning outcomes.

The experimental results demonstrate that CACRE outperforms traditional recommendation systems in terms of accuracy, user satisfaction, and learning retention. The incorporation of contextual factors, such as user mood, learning pace, and time availability, enhances the relevance of the recommended content. Furthermore, the system's ability to learn from user interactions ensures continuous improvement in recommendation quality.

The proposed framework has significant implications for e-learning platforms, as it provides a scalable and efficient solution for delivering personalized learning experiences. Future work will explore the integration of more complex contextual data, such as biometric feedback and social learning patterns, to further refine the recommendation process. Additionally, real-world deployment and feedback from diverse user groups will help validate the system’s effectiveness in various educational settings. Personalized Learning is an important tool and it has been used in different fields [21-29].

Author Statements:

- **Ethical approval:** The conducted research is not related to either human or animal use.
- **Conflict of interest:** The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper
- **Acknowledgement:** The authors declare that they have nobody or no-company to acknowledge.
- **Author contributions:** The authors declare that they have equal right on this paper.
- **Funding information:** The authors declare that there is no funding to be acknowledged.
- **Data availability statement:** The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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