

# SynTOD: Augmented Response Synthesis for Robust End-to-End Task-Oriented Dialogue System

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## Abstract

Task-oriented dialogue (TOD) systems are introduced to solve specific tasks, which focus on training multiple tasks such as language understanding, tracking states, and generating appropriate responses to help users achieve their specific goals. Currently, one of the remaining challenges in this emergent research field is the capability to produce more robust architectures fine-tuned for end-to-end TOD systems. In this study, we consider this issue by exploiting the ability of pre-trained models to provide synthesis responses, which are then used as the input for the fine-tuned process. The main idea is to overcome the gap between the training process and inference process during fine-tuning end-to-end TOD systems. The experiment on Multiwoz datasets shows the effectiveness of our model compared with strong baselines in this research field. The source code is available for further exploitation.

**Keywords:** task oriented dialogue, end-to-end system, synthesis data augmentation, pre-trained language models

## 1. Introduction

Different from open domain dialogue (ODD), which aims to provide smooth conversations with humans on various topics, task-oriented dialogue (TOD) systems are developed to assist users in achieving some specific goals such as hotel booking or restaurant recommendation (Fu et al., 2022). The traditional approach follows a modular pipeline architecture, which is divided into three separate components: natural language understanding (NLU), dialogue state tracking (DST), and natural language generation (NLG). Nonetheless, this approach has two main limitations (Chen et al., 2017): i) it is difficult to propagate when processing the end user’s feedback; and ii) it requires significant human efforts to adapt to the new environments (e.g., training with new data). In this regard, many studies attempt to construct an end-to-end trainable framework for TOD systems based on large pre-trained language models (Hosseini-Asl et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2021, 2022). Accordingly, those models are typically developed by fine-tuning the pre-trained model, which utilizes the strength of pre-trained networks to learn task-agnostic language representations on specific data. However, the limitation of this approach is the over-fitting of the final task and forgetting the useful capabilities from the pre-training phase (Kulhánek et al., 2021). Therefore, recent studies try integrating multi-task learning into fine-tuning end-to-end TOD models by adding

related auxiliary tasks. For instance, Lee (2021) defines span selection as an auxiliary task for enhancing the encoder of the T5 backbone model. Kulhánek et al. (2021) demonstrate that the response selection tasks are helpful on top of GPT-2 (Radford et al., 2019). Sequentially, Cholakov and Kolev (2022) combine the two above models by exploiting response selection tasks based on the T5 (Raffel et al., 2020) as the backbone model. Furthermore, PPTOD (Su et al., 2022) is introduced as the first pre-trained multiple tasks with task-specific prompts and alleviates the error accumulation in a plug-and-play fashion.

In this paper, inspired by the recent studies in this research field, we try to exploit deeply the capability of pre-trained TOD models for robust fine-tuning of end-to-end models with multi-task learning. The basic idea is to overcome the gap between the training and inference process for fine-tuning end-to-end TOD models. Accordingly, based on our observa-

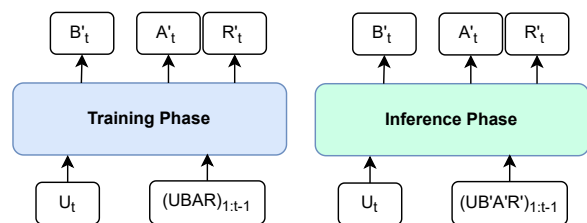


Figure 1: The gap between the training and inference phase for fine-tuning the end-to-end TOD model. BAR and B'A'R' denote the belief state, action, and response of the ground truth and generate results, respectively.

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tion, for the fine-tuning end-to-end model with the

sequence of tasks such as DST and NLG tasks, the training process uses ground truth to calculate the cross-entropy loss, however, the inference phase uses generated responses, which is illustrated in the Figure 1. Specifically, we utilize the well-known strong baseline models in this research field such as T5 (Raffel et al., 2020), MT-TOD (Lee, 2021), and PPTOD (Su et al., 2022) to generate the synthetic data. The results are then utilized to improve the auxiliary tasks for a robust fine-tuning process. According to the experiment reports, our proposed method outperforms the strong baseline model on two benchmark TOD datasets, which are MultiWOZ 2.1 (Eric et al., 2020) and MultiWOZ 2.2 (Zang et al., 2020), and achieves new state-of-the-art results on MultiWOZ 2.1 in the end-to-end paradigm. We release the source code for further exploitation<sup>1</sup>.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. End-to-end TOD model

In contrast with pipeline-based TOD systems, end-to-end TOD directly optimizes and trains with a single model by mapping the input to the output. A general approach for building end-to-end systems is to fine-tune pre-trained language models, for instance, GPT-2 (Hosseini-Asl et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2021) or T5 (Lee, 2021; Bang et al., 2023) to task-specific data. In this study, we use T5, the encoder-decoder architecture as the backbone for our proposed model, which is illustrated in Figure 2. Specifically, for the current dialogue turn  $t$ , the

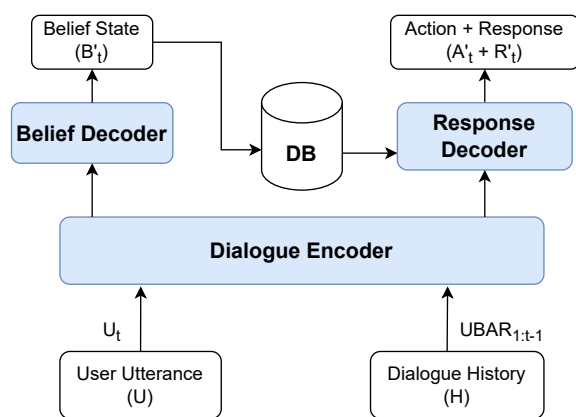


Figure 2: The overview architecture of end-to-end TOD model.

encoder layer encodes the utterance  $U_t$  and the dialogue history  $H_t$ . Technically,  $H_t$  obtain the previous workflow sequence of utterance  $U$ , belief state  $B$ , database  $DB$ , action  $A$ , and response  $R$ , which

is formulated as follows:

$$H_t = [(U_1, B_1, DB_1, A_1, R_1), \dots, (U_{t-1}, B_{t-1}, DB_{t-1}, A_{t-1}, R_{t-1})] \quad (1)$$

The belief decoder generates a belief state  $B_t$ , which includes a sequence of a domain name, slot names, and slot values. These values are then used to query a domain-specific database to determine a list of matching entities  $DB_t$ . The list of entities is then used as the input for the response decoder to generate system action  $A_t$ , which consists of (domain, action-type, slot) triples, and natural language response  $R_t$ , which generates tokens in an auto-regressive manner. This procedure is repeated until the dialogue is complete. In this regard, the joint loss function can be formulated as follows:

$$\mathcal{L} = \mathcal{L}_{Belief} + \mathcal{L}_{Resp} \quad (2)$$

where  $\mathcal{L}_{Belief}$  and  $\mathcal{L}_{Resp}$  are negative log-likelihood language modeling losses for the two decoders layers, which are sequentially calculated as follows:

$$\mathcal{L}_{Belief} = -\log(p(B_t|H_t, U_t)) \quad (3)$$

$$\mathcal{L}_{Resp} = -\log(p(A_t, R_t|H_t, U_t, DB_t)) \quad (4)$$

### 2.2. Augmented responses synthesis for end-to-end TOD models

Recent studies attempt to add training auxiliary tasks to improve end-to-end TOD systems' performance. For instance, MTTOD (Lee, 2021) utilized span selection as the auxiliary task for improving the encoder layer. RSTOD (Cholakov and Kolev, 2022) improves the MTTOD model by exploiting response selection. PPTOD (Su et al., 2022) is a new dialogue multi-task pre-training stage with four TOD-related tasks. TOATOD (Bang et al., 2023) enhances the performance of the DST and NLG tasks using the reinforcement learning method.

In this study, we try to exploit the auxiliary task to develop a robust fine-tuned end-to-end model. The main idea is to overcome the gap between the training and inference processes. Observationally, for the inference process, the multi-task in the end-to-end model takes the generated results of the previous turn  $(B'A'R')_{1:t-1}$  to predict the current turn, which is different from the training process using ground truth  $(BAR)_{1:t-1}$ . In this regard, we utilize the generated responses of the pre-trained TOD model as the additional samples for a robust end-to-end TOD system. This strategy enables the fine-tuning of end-to-end TOD models to mitigate propagation errors during the inference phase, particularly when some of the generated states are incorrect. Our proposed method is illustrated in the Figure 3. Accordingly, with each utterance at turn  $t$ , two dialogue histories  $H$  and  $H'$  denote ground

<sup>1</sup><https://github.com/nqchieutb01/SynTOD>

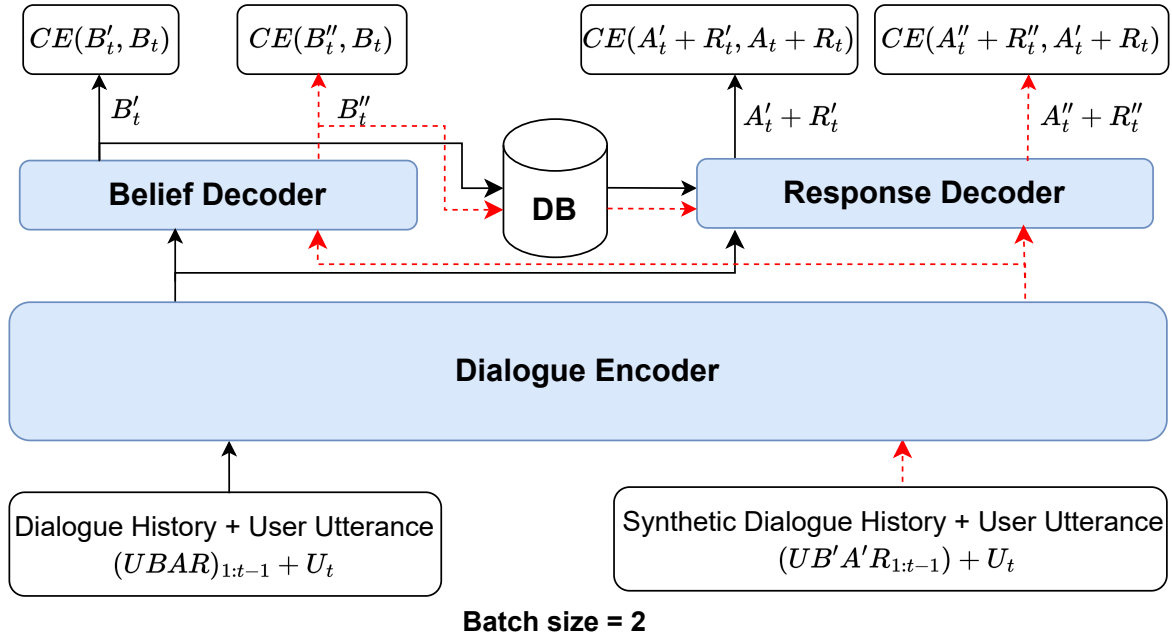


Figure 3: The overview of the proposed model (SynTOD) with batch size = 2. The black and dashed red lines refer to our model flow when the inputs are original and synthesis dialogues, respectively.  $CE$  denotes cross-entropy loss function.  $B'$  denotes the belief state output of the original dialogue, and  $B''$  is the belief state output of the synthesis dialogue. Similar meaning for action ( $A$ ) and response ( $R$ ).

truth and synthesis history, respectively. Notably, the synthesis responses are generated from pre-trained TOD models. The loss function in Equation 2 can be reformulated as follows:

$$\mathcal{L} = \alpha(\mathcal{L}_{Belief} + \mathcal{L}_{Resp}) + \beta(\mathcal{L}'_{Belief} + \mathcal{L}'_{Resp}) \quad (5)$$

where  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  are hyperparameters, which are both set to 1 for the experiments.  $\mathcal{L}'_{Belief}$  and  $\mathcal{L}'_{Resp}$  denotes the log-likelihood language modeling loss of synthesis samples, which are sequentially calculated as follows:

$$\mathcal{L}'_{Belief} = -\log(p(B_t|H'_t, U_t)) \quad (6)$$

$$\mathcal{L}'_{Resp} = -\log(p(A'_t, R'_t|H'_t, U_t, DB_t)) \quad (7)$$

where  $H'$  represents the synthesis dialogue history:

$$H'_t = [(U_1, B'_1, DB_1, A'_1, R_1), \dots, (U_{t-1}, B'_{t-1}, DB_{t-1}, A'_{t-1}, R_{t-1})] \quad (8)$$

### 3. Experiment

#### 3.1. Experiment Setup

**Dataset:** We used MultiWOZ 2.1 and MultiWOZ 2.2 as the two benchmark datasets for our evaluation. Specifically, the first version of the MultiWOZ dataset was released in Budzianowski et al. (2018) which consists of 8438, 1000, and 1000 for training, dev, and test sets, respectively. MultiWOZ 2.1 (Eric

et al., 2020) is released to correct dialogue states and add explicit system action annotation in the original version. MultiWOZ 2.2 (Zang et al., 2020) has fixes for state annotation of turns, a redefined ontology, canonical forms for slot values, and slot span annotations.

**Baselines and Setup:** We re-implement three strong baseline models of end-to-end TOD models (in the Figure 2) for the evaluation:

- **T5** (Raffel et al., 2020): is a well-known pre-trained language model with encoder-decoder architecture.
- **MTTOD** (Lee, 2021): uses the T5 backbone and integrates multi-task learning by adopting span prediction as an auxiliary task.
- **PPTOD** (Su et al., 2022): we replace the T5 backbone with the pre-trained weight of the PPTOD model, which is trained on large-scale dialogue datasets.

All evaluated models use a small version of the backbone T5 model, which includes 512 dimensions, 8-headed attention, and 6 layers for both the encoder and decoder. Regarding the hyperparameter, the models are trained for 10 epochs with the batch size 8, the learning rate is 5e-4, and the proportion of warm-up steps is set to 0.2. We utilize the AdamW (Loshchilov and Hutter, 2019) optimizer with the linear learning rate decaying scheme for

Model	MultiWOZ 2.1				MultiWOZ 2.2			
	Inform	Success	BLEU	Combined	Inform	Success	BLEU	Combined
T5	92,1	81,9	19,05	106,05	78,3	70,5	<b>18,57</b>	92,97
MTTOD	92,4	83.0	18,47	106,17	79.0	72,2	18,43	94,03
PPTOD	91.4	82.5	18.88	105.83	80,3	<b>73,8</b>	18,38	95,43
<b>Ours:</b>								
+ T5	<b>93.3</b>	83.4	<b>19.82</b>	<b>108.17</b>	84.1	73.0	17.82	96.37
+ MT-TOD	92.1	83.6	18.58	107.43	82.8	73.0	18.48	96.38
+ PPTOD	92.7	<b>84.3</b>	19.30	107.80	<b>85.7</b>	73.0	17.73	<b>97.08</b>

Table 1: Reported results on MultiWOZ 2.1 and MultiWOZ 2.2 with end-to-end evaluation. Bold texts indicate the best results.

optimization.

**Evaluation Metrics** In our experiments on the MultiWOZ 2.1 dataset, we employ an evaluation script as in (Lee, 2021). For the MultiWOZ 2.2 dataset, we incorporate a newly standard evaluation script, which is published in Nekvinda and Dušek (2021). More specially, both evaluation scripts contain automatic metrics as follows: **Inform** measures whether a system has provided a correct entity. **Success** measures whether it has answered all the requested information. Both are calculated on the level of dialogues. **BLEU** (Papineni et al., 2002) is calculated by comparing n-grams in human-written references and machine-generated hypotheses. It measures the fluency of output responses, where human utterances are used as the reference. Finally, the **Combined score** is computed as:

$$Combined = (Inform + Success)0.5 + BLEU \quad (9)$$

### 3.2. Experiment Results

Table 1 reports the results of the proposed method, which executes on three strong baselines. By incorporating synthetic dialogue responses, the input size is doubled. As reported results, the performances are consistently improving in the final scores (combined metrics) across all models, showing that augmented data is effective for boosting model performance. More specifically, in the MultiWOZ 2.1 dataset, four metrics of the proposed method outperform baseline models. In the MultiWOZ 2.2 dataset, the *Inform* score and *Success* score are better than the baseline, while the BLEU score slightly decreases. The results indicate the impact of our method for adjusting trade-off problems between BLEU scores and others (i.e., Inform) since the response from our model is robust by learning the auxiliary task (i.e., cross-entropy loss) between generate response ( $A'' + R''$ ) and the synthesis value of the action with ground truth response ( $A' + R$ ), as shown in Equation 7. In this regard, the generated response can be learned robustly with the noise values in previous processes (e.g.,  $R''$ ). Generally, our method achieves the best results on the MultiWOZ 2.1 dataset using T5 as the

backbone and MultiWOZ 2.2 using PPTOD, respectively. We assume that with the cleaned version of the MultiWOZ 2.1 dataset, MultiWOZ 2.2 can achieve better performance on pre-trained TOD models.

Furthermore, Table 2 reports the results of our model compared with other recent studies on MultiWOZ 2.1 datasets, which is widely used as the benchmark dataset in this research field. Specifically, we compare our models with other strong baselines including SimpleTOD (Hosseini-Asl et al., 2020), UBAR (Yang et al., 2021), MTTOD (Lee, 2021), RSTOD (Cholakov and Kolev, 2022), PPTOD (Su et al., 2022), GALAXY (He et al., 2022), and TOATOD (Bang et al., 2023). Accordingly, our

Model	Backbone(size)	Combined
SimpleTOD	DistilGPT2(82 M)	92.98
UBAR	DistilGPT2(82 M)	105.70
MTTOD*	T5 <sub>small</sub> (102.2 M)	103.99
	T5 <sub>base</sub> (360.9M)	107.50
RSTOD*	T5 <sub>small</sub> (105.5 M)	108.34
PPTOD†	T5 <sub>small</sub> (60 M)	101.52
	T5 <sub>base</sub> (220 M)	102.26
GALAXY	UniLM(340 M)	105.92
GALAXY†	UniLM(340 M)	110.76
TOATOD	T5 <sub>small</sub> (60 M)	104.54
	T5 <sub>base</sub> (220 M)	109.32
<b>SynTOD</b>	T5 <sub>small</sub> (60 M)	<b>108.17</b>
	T5 <sub>base</sub> (220 M)	<b>108.75</b>

Table 2: Reported results on MultiWOZ 2.1 Compared with state-of-the-art end-to-end models. The values with \* are from (Cholakov and Kolev, 2022). Other results are from the respective papers. † denotes pre-trained TOD models.

model outperforms similar trainable params models and is competitive with large models in this research field. It demonstrates that our model, by augmenting the synthesis responses as the auxiliary task can improve the performance of the end-to-end TOD model. Furthermore, different from other models in this research field, the performance between the large version (e.g., the base model) and the

Our Model	Size	Inform	Success	BLEU	Combined
+ T5	small - 60 M	<b>93,3</b>	83,4	<b>19,82</b>	<b>108.17</b>
	base - 220 M	<b>93,7</b>	<b>84,8</b>	19,5	<b>108.75</b>
+ MT-TOD	small - 102 M	92,1	<b>83,6</b>	18,58	107,43
	base - 360.9 M	92,4	83,1	19,65	107,40
+ PPTOD	small - 60 M	92,7	84,3	19,30	107,80
	base - 220 M	<b>93,7</b>	84,1	<b>19,54</b>	108,44

Table 3: Reported results on MultiWOZ 2.1 of the proposed approach with different backbone versions (i.e., small and base). Bold texts indicate the best results of each version, respectively.

small version of the proposed model is not significant. More details of this issue are reported in the Table 3. In this regard, we make a hypothesis that using generated results for the training process of TOD tasks can reduce the gap between the small and larger versions of the backbone models. Specifically, this issue is taken into account as the future work of this study.

### 3.3. Case Study

Figure 4 shows a case in which the proposed synthetic approach can overcome the complex query. Specifically, by using generated results for the train-

**Turn 1**

**User:** I am looking for a train that departs Cambridge after 21:00 on Thursday

**w/o SynTOD Response:** Where will you be traveling to ?

**SynTOD Response:** Where will you be traveling to ?

**Turn 2**

**User:** I am heading to stansted airport, i need to book for 2 people and can i please get a reference number

**w/o SynTOD Response:** [value\_id] leaves at [value\_leave] and arrives at [value\_arrive] . would you like me to book that for you ?

[value\_reference] ❌

**w SynTOD Response:** booking was successful, the total fee is [value\_price] payable at the station . reference number [value\_reference] . is there anything else i can help you with ?

[value\_reference] ✅

Figure 4: The example of two consecutive dialog turns in dialog session SNG0446 from the MultiWOZ2.1 dataset. The green boxes and red boxes indicate the response of with and without generated results, respectively. The task-related entities are highlighted in yellow.

ing process, SynTOD can provide both request booking and give the reference number that other methods might fail to mention the important entity of the complex query, which leads the model to be more stable.

## 4. Related Work

In the era of pre-trained language models, the end-to-end trainable framework has been an emergent research for TOD systems. A general approach for building end-to-end systems is to fine-tune pre-trained language models. SimpleTOD (Hosseini-Asl et al., 2020) and UBAR (Yang et al., 2021) are two well-known end-to-end models of this approach. Furthermore, pre-training language models for dialogue tasks, such as GALAXY (He et al., 2022) and PPTOD (Su et al., 2022) have provided promising results. MTTOD (Lee, 2021) and RSTOD (Cholakov and Kolev, 2022) apply auxiliary tasks to improve the performance of TOD systems. Recently, with the rapid growth of large pre-trained language models (billions of parameters), synthetic data generation become a promising approach for developing TOD systems (Lin et al., 2022; Bao et al., 2023). However, most previous studies used the synthetic approach to augment grounded dialogue data. To the best of our knowledge, this paper is the first study to generate synthetic results for improving the training process of TOD systems.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, we propose a new strategy to incorporate synthesis data for the training process to enable the TOD models to be more robust. Specifically, we utilize the synthesis responses from backbone models as the augmented data and training together with the fine-tuned end-to-end TOD model to make the model more robust. Experiments show the effectiveness of the proposed method in various strong baseline models. Regarding the future work of this study, We plan to extend our new version with large backbones (e.g., a large language model with billions of parameters) to generate synthetic responses for improving the performance.

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