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Exploring the Learning by Teaching with Social Robots

Enabling Exploratory Studies on Learning by Teaching with Social Robots through Wizard-of-Oz Control

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Abstract

Abstract goes here ... You may include up to six keywords or phrases. Keywords should be separated with semi-colons.

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1 Introduction

Will rewrite when working on the abstract, need to write about already existing tools. Currently, this is a mixup of the abstract and the introduction.

Social robots are increasingly finding their way into learning environments, where their role as collaborators, tutors, or learning companions is being actively explored. In particular, the paradigm of *Learning by Teaching* (LbT) offers a promising framework in which children can reinforce their understanding and social-emotional skills by teaching a robot. This approach has the potential to enhance engagement, improve soft skills, and support inclusive education.

This bachelor project is part of the broader TESORO initiative, for which an SNSF funding application has been submitted and is currently awaiting approval. My contribution focuses on a practical implementation: the design and development of a web-based dashboard that enables a Wizard-of-Oz control of a social robot during an exploratory experiment involving turn-taking with children.

The experiment consists of a Lego-building task performed by two children taking turns. The robot, remotely controlled via the dashboard, intervenes when turn-taking violations occur, aiming to regulate the interaction and reinforce collaborative behavior.

This report presents the background of the project, the research and implementation goals, the technical architecture of the system, and the planned experimental study. The developed dashboard serves as a starting point for preliminary studies and lays the groundwork for later stages of the TESORO project where the robot will learn these regulatory behaviors from various operators, including researchers, teachers, or even the children themselves. Additionally, it could also serve other projects that are based on Human-Robot Interaction (HRI) since it will be developed in a way that is re-usable for different scenarios.

1.1 Report structure

The rest of the report is organized as follows: Section 2 presents the related work and theoretical framework; Section 3 outlines the experiment scenario and research goals; Section 4 describes the dashboard's architecture and implementation; Section 5 presents the evaluation process and findings across three iterative walkthroughs, highlighting how user feedback informed the co-design of the final system; and Section 6 concludes with future directions.

2 State of the art

Here we will summarize the main findings, carefully explain the differences with our work and could have a small "background information" section.

Explain all acronyms and abbreviations. For example, the first time an acronym is used, write it out in full and place the acronym in parentheses. When using the Graphical User Interface (GUI) version, the use may...

3 Experiment Design and Goals

The experiment designed for this project aims to explore how a social robot can support children's learning through turn-taking regulation. The overall investigation is structured into three progressive stages:

- **Step 1: Robot as Regulator** - Two children collaboratively build a Lego tower by taking turns. The robot observes and intervenes in case of turn violations or inappropriate behavior, using multimodal cues such as LED lights, vocalizations, and gestures.
- **Step 2: Child as Regulator** - A child is tasked with regulating the interactions between the robot and another child that will perform a similar task to Step 1. This step exploits the LbT paradigm, where the regulator learns how to collaborate and keep turns.
- **Step 3: Robot Learns How and When to Intervene** - The robot applies the learned behavior during interactions with children in Step 1 and Step 2.

This report provides the foundational knowledge for implementing later stages of autonomous learning. The robot's interventions are controlled via a Wizard-of-Oz setup, and the primary goal is to assess the feasibility and effectiveness of such interventions in developing children's soft skills.

To be expanded

4 System Design and Implementation

4.1 System Architecture

Overview

The system architecture was designed to enable an operator to control a social robot in a Wizard-of-Oz fashion during experiments with children. The main components include a web-based dashboard for real-time control [2], a communication layer based on ROS2 (Robot Operating System 2) [6, 4, 3], and the RoboMaster EP robot [1]. The dashboard provides intuitive controls for triggering robot interventions and monitoring status, while the ROS2 integration ensures reliable communication and execution of commands. This architecture prioritizes usability, low latency, and safety, supporting the experimental requirements for responsive and effective interactions. The system was designed to facilitate iterative development and easy modifications, supporting a co-design approach as outlined in the TESORO project proposal [5]. This flexibility enables rapid adaptation of the dashboard based on feedback from stakeholders and participants during the study.

4.2 Component Description

Dashboard

The dashboard is a web-based interface developed using Next.js, with the user interface built on Material UI (MUI) components for a modern and consistent look. It allows the operator to monitor the robot's status and trigger interventions in real time. Communication with the robot is achieved via `roslibjs` [9], which enables the dashboard to send and receive ROS messages over the network.

Middleware Server

Due to a known limitation in `roslibjs` when interacting with ROS2 action servers, a minimal middleware server was implemented within the dashboard system. This server is built with Express and uses `rcnodejs` [7] to interface directly with ROS2, acting as a bridge between the dashboard and ROS2 action servers. This ensures reliable execution of complex robot actions and exposes additional functionalities to the web interface.

ROS Communication Layer

The communication layer is based on ROS2 and uses `rosbridge_server` [8] running on the Ubuntu machine that controls the robot ROS2 drivers. This layer handles the communication between the dashboard and the robot, allowing for real-time updates and command execution.

Robot Control and Action Servers

The Ubuntu machine runs several ROS2 nodes and action servers, including:

- `robomaster_ros` [4]: ROS2 drivers for the RoboMaster EP robot, providing low-level control and sensor access.
- `robomaster_hri` [3]: Custom packages for high-level robot control and human-robot interaction.
- Security and safety action servers: Allow the operator to immediately halt robot actions or trigger safety protocols as needed.

RoboMaster EP Robot

The RoboMaster EP robot [1] is the physical platform used for the experiment. It connects to the Ubuntu machine via its dedicated access point, ensuring a stable and isolated communication channel. The robot executes commands received from the ROS2 action servers and ROS2 nodes, and provides feedback to the dashboard.

Network and Deployment

All components are deployed on a local network to ensure low latency and reliability. The dashboard can be accessed from any device on the network, while the Ubuntu machine acts as the central hub for ROS2 communication and robot control. Since the RoboMaster EP robot connects wirelessly and provides odometry data, the system is not restricted to a laboratory setting. This flexibility allows experiments and interactions with children to take place in more neutral or familiar environments, which can be beneficial for naturalistic studies and participant comfort.

4.3 Safety Considerations

Ensuring the safety of participants and equipment was a primary concern throughout the system design. To address this, a dedicated ROS2 node was developed to act as an emergency stop mechanism. This node can immediately halt all ongoing robot actions and stop the RoboMaster EP's motors.

A prominent "Emergency Stop" button is integrated into the dashboard interface, allowing the operator to trigger this safety mechanism at any time during an experiment. When activated, the command is sent via the ROS2 communication layer to the safety node running on the Ubuntu machine, ensuring a rapid response. This feature is essential for experiments involving children, as it provides the operator with immediate control to prevent unintended or unsafe robot behavior. The system was tested to ensure that the emergency stop reliably overrides all other commands and brings the robot to a safe state.

4.4 System Architecture Diagram

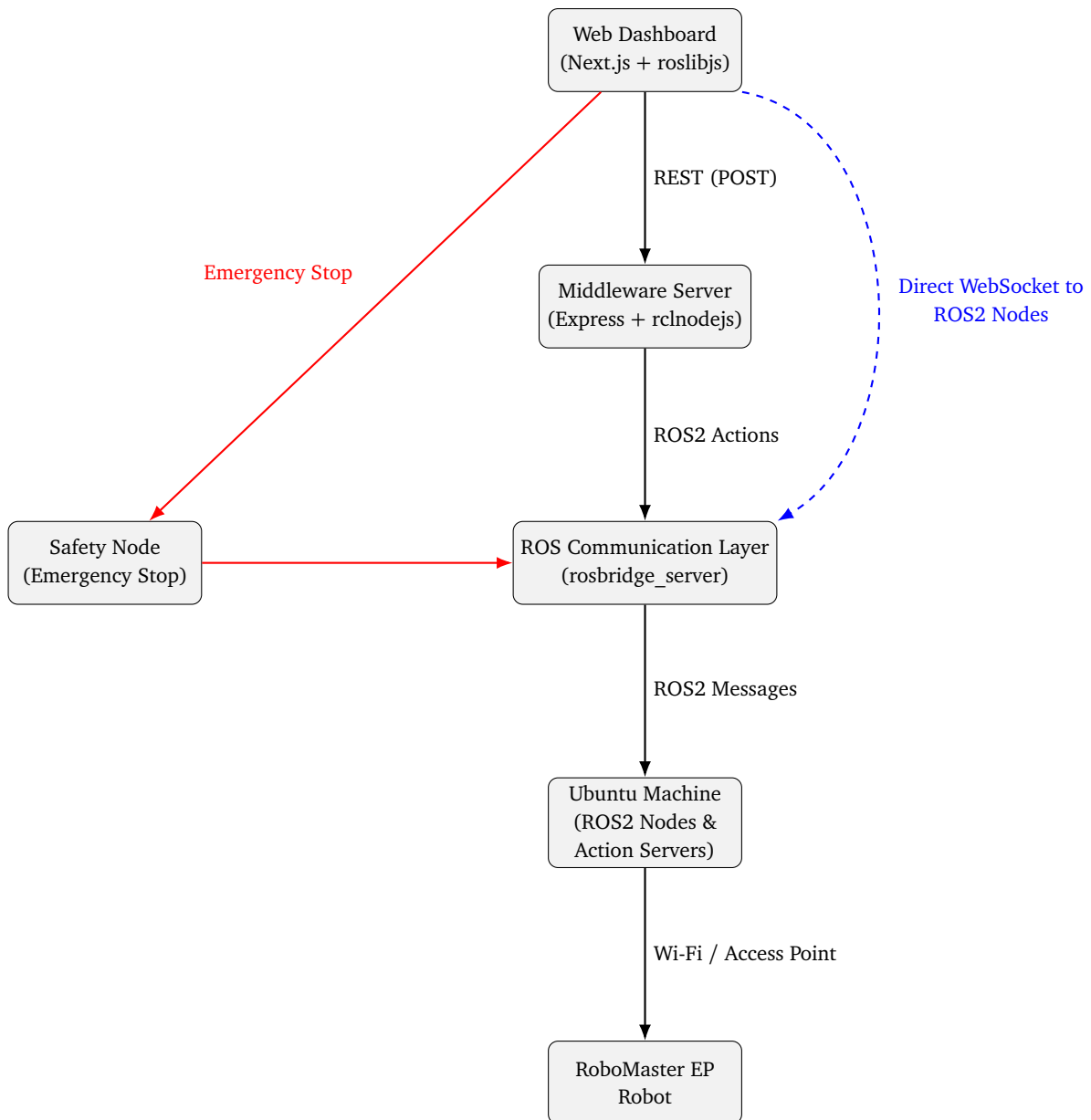


Figure 1. System architecture for Wizard-of-Oz control of the RoboMaster EP robot. The dashboard communicates with the middleware server via REST (POST request), and can also communicate directly with the ROS2 nodes using WebSocket (roslibjs).

4.5 Dashboard Interface

Here we will describe the final dashboard interface, including the main features and functionalities. We will also include screenshots of the dashboard to illustrate its design and layout.

5 Evaluation and Iterative Co-Design

This section presents the evaluation of the system through three exploratory sessions, each structured as an iterative walkthrough. These sessions aimed to assess the usability and flexibility of the dashboard, understand the dynamics of child-robot interaction, and collect feedback to inform the design of both the interface and the robot's behavior. Each evaluation contributed to the co-design process by revealing user needs and contextual challenges in real time.

The sessions included: (1) a walkthrough with HCI and accessibility experts, who role-played as elementary or middle school students; (2) a session with high school students working in pairs and simulating collaborative behavior on the shared floor mat; and (3) a pilot study with middle school children, which evolved into a semi-structured discussion and informal walkthrough focusing on robot behavior and social interaction patterns.

The following subsections describe the setup, key observations, and design implications of each session, followed by a summary of the iterative changes implemented in response to user feedback.

5.1 Walkthrough with Experts

Setup and procedure

The first evaluation session was conducted in an office setting and involved two PhD researchers with expertise in Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) and accessibility. They were asked to role-play as two children collaborating on a Lego tower building task. Initially, they were seated on the floor approximately one meter apart, with the RoboMaster EP robot placed slightly in front of them at the midpoint of this distance, not directly between them.

The system was operated by an evaluator seated nearby at a desk, with a direct line of sight to the play zone. A third researcher took notes throughout the session, while two additional observers with expertise in educational technology and human-robot interaction silently monitored the interaction and its outcomes.

Although the scenario was designed around pre-defined robot positions, the participants quickly moved from their initial spots, rendering the static positions ineffective. However, the dashboard's joystick feature enabled the operator to adapt in real time by manually repositioning the robot and triggering actions. The session unfolded as a dynamic and playful interaction between the two participants and the robot, including episodes of joint play, interaction breakdowns, and regulatory robot interventions.

After the active session, all participants engaged in an open-ended discussion, which yielded critical reflections on the interface's design, the robot's perceived role, and the effectiveness of various robot behaviors. These observations and insights directly informed the next iteration of the dashboard.

Key observations

- The pre-defined movement positions were quickly invalidated when the "children" moved from their expected spots. The experts stressed the importance of allowing the operator to improvise and react dynamically.
- Negative robot feedback, such as "shaking the head" by spinning on the spot, was perceived as entertaining, rather than corrective. This could encourage children to misbehave just to see the robot react.
- Experts observed that opening the box with the gripper and presenting it to a participant invited them to place something inside. This could be used as a form of collaborative engagement or de-escalation.
- Experts emphasized the importance of distinguishing between different levels of feedback, both positive and negative. For positive reinforcement, a scalable approach could include combinations of lights, sounds, and movement, ranging from a simple LED blink to a celebratory motion sequence. Negative feedback, on the other hand, should be kept minimal and neutral: limited to red lights, with no sound, and little to no movement, possibly just a slight backward motion to signal withdrawal. Sound should be excluded from negative interventions entirely to prevent the robot from becoming a source of entertainment.
- The robot was perceived more as a "peer" than an authority figure, prompting the need to frame it accordingly in both behavior and design.

- Experts advised against focusing the robot's attention too much on one child, as this could lead to perceptions of unfairness.
- Introducing the robot to children before the task might help reduce distractions during the experiment, as curiosity would be partially satisfied beforehand.
- Large Lego Duplo bricks limited complexity of the task; smaller pieces might offer a more engaging challenge.

Design implications

- The role of the robot as a peer should be reinforced through behavior that is cooperative, inclusive, and friendly rather than disciplinary.
- Feedback must be clearly divided into positive and negative categories, with minimal overlap in how they are perceived.
- The dashboard should support a broader set of robot actions, including flexible movement, and the ability to give nuanced feedback.
- Following this session, the dashboard was updated to provide broader control over robot functionalities, including gripper manipulation and advanced LED options such as color selection, blink timing, and speed adjustments. Although joystick control for custom movement was already available, the session reinforced its importance in enabling operator improvisation. Feedback actions were reorganized into clearly defined positive and negative categories with different intensity levels, and the use of sound was restricted to positive feedback only. These changes aimed to improve the system's responsiveness and better align robot behavior with user expectations.

5.2 Walkthrough with High School Students

Setup and procedure

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Key observations

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Design implications

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5.3 Walkthrough with Middle School Students

Setup and procedure

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Key observations

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Design implications

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5.4 Summary of Key Iterative Changes

Here we will summarize the key changes made to the dashboard based on the feedback received from the walkthroughs and pilot study. This section will highlight the iterative design process and how user feedback informed the development of the system.

6 Conclusions

This project presents the design and implementation of a web-based dashboard to enable Wizard-of-Oz control of a social robot used in a Learning by Teaching experiment with children. The system is part of the larger TESORO initiative and lays the groundwork for studying how social robots can assist in learning soft skills like turn-taking.

To be expanded

6.1 Future Work

Here we will write about future work like the ones mentioned in the TESORO project proposal like :
Long-term goal: enabling real-time learning from the child's regulatory actions and shifting toward semi-autonomous robot behavior.

References

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