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# Meta-Learning for BCI: A Promising New Direction

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**Abstract-** Despite impressive results in controlled settings, EEG-based Brain-Computer Interface (BCI) systems often falter in real-world scenarios due to challenges such as low signal-to-noise ratios (SNR), limited subject/trial datasets, poor cross-subject generalization, lengthy calibration, and lack of robustness outside the laboratory. Meta-learning (MeL) offers a compelling solution by enabling models to "learn how to learn," with support-query paradigms, fast adaptation, and task-aware inference. We examine two representative implementations - Model-Agnostic-Meta-Learning for EEG (MAML-EEG) and Adaptive Bayesian Meta-Learning (ABML) - demonstrating strong performance on BCI Competition IV datasets, outperforming established baselines without subject-dependent calibration. We conclude by summarizing core contributions, outlining future research paths, and highlighting the potential of MeL to unify disparate BCI challenges into an integrated, scalable framework.

**Keywords-** EEG, brain-computer interface, meta-learning, cross-subject transfer, few-shot adaptation

## I. BCI RESEARCH AND THE KEY CHALLENGES

One of the greatest issues machine learning (ML) researchers face is that the developed research models do not readily transfer into real-world usage [1-2], [31]. A research outcome may fail outside controlled conditions for many reasons, including limited computational resources in common devices (e.g., PCs or smartphones) or the presence of noisy, imperfect inputs rather than clean laboratory data. This challenge is especially common in the broader domain of EEG-based Brain-Computer Interfaces (BCIs) [3-4], [32], where systems strive to interpret brain activity in real-time, not only for controlling computers or robotic agents, but also for applications in communication, rehabilitation, cognitive monitoring, and beyond.

BCI's leverage non-invasive electroencephalogram (EEG) signal acquisition, followed by sophisticated signal processing, feature extraction, and pattern recognition to transform neural activity into meaningful outputs such as

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controlling commands, diagnostic insights, or providing users with adaptive feedback as they use BCI systems in dynamic settings [1-2]. Here we will discuss the five most pressing issues facing the field, providing an explanation of each and its impact on BCI research and development.

### A. Low Signal to Noise Ratio (SNR)

EEG data is gathered via electrodes placed across the scalp, detecting weak neural signals that must traverse the skull and hair that inherently degrade signal quality [3]. To capture these attenuated signals, electrodes must be highly sensitive, making EEG recordings prone to contamination from eye blinks, muscle movement, facial movements, and electrical interference. Artifact removal is often handled using Independent Component Analysis (ICA), but this remains somewhat subjective and heuristic - a concern highlighted by Urigüen & García-Zapirain in their review [5]. These issues collectively result in low SNR in EEG datasets, complicating generalisation and reducing model robustness.

### B. Low subject/trial counts

EEG data collection is usually long-period, fatiguing for participants and vulnerable to recording errors that may only be discovered during post-processing. Unsurprisingly, both public and private EEG datasets tend to feature relatively few subjects and trials, especially when compared to benchmark datasets in other machine learning domains [6-7], [33-35]. This scarcity of data limits the ability to train models that generalize well.

### C. Generalisation across subject

Models trained under a subject-dependent regime-where data from the same individual is used for both training and evaluation, often report inflated performance. However, when tested using more rigorous approaches like Leave-One-Subject-Out (LOSO), significant performance drops are common, underscoring the challenge of cross-subject generalisation [8]. Efforts to mitigate this have included transfer learning strategies and domain adaptation, but a recent review confirms that robust generalisation across diverse participants remains elusive [9].

#### D. Adaptation/calibration

Even models that generalise well across participants often struggle with new subjects, requiring lengthy calibration sessions to attain reliable performance. Work has been done to try and overcome this issue. Vidaurre et al. [10] introduced a co-adaptive calibration framework that begins with a subject-agnostic classifier, rapidly adapts in-session, and achieves strong control-sometimes in as little as 3-6 minutes - without intensive pre-training. Building on this, Huang et al. [11] reviewed signal-processing approaches, such as transfer learning and semi-supervised learning, that smartly leverage prior data to reduce calibration time across sessions, subjects, and devices – however a clear solution has yet to be found.

#### E. Real-world robustness

BCI systems developed in the lab benefit from controlled environments, making them less resilient to the noise and variability found in real-world settings. Nicolás-Alonso & Gómez-Gil [4] offer an extensive overview of EEG-BCI components and emphasise the challenges involved in transitioning these systems to everyday environments. Recent trend analyses [13] reinforce that reliably deploying BCIs in naturalistic contexts remains one of the field's most pressing challenges.

Clearly there are multiple issues in the BCI field that researchers must overcome for further real-world BCI applications. While progress is being made across all these issues, this commonly takes the form of models designed to handle one specific issue, with the wider research community fracturing solutions across different model designs. Recently, a new model design approach - Meta-Learning (MeL) - has grown in popularity for EEG model design, and it is the author's view that these models present a new opportunity to tackle all these issues at once. The rest of this paper is broken down into three sections. In section 2, we will briefly define MeL and provide an overview of its broad forms, before discussing how it deals with the previously mentioned BCI research issues. Section 3 will showcase two high-performing MeL models and place them into the broader BCI research context to understand how they address the BCI research issues. Section 4 will summarise the paper and provide some recommendations on the importance and use of MeL for BCI research going forward [14-15].

## II. META-LEARNING AND BCI

Over the past decade, a wide range of AI and machine learning approaches - including deep neural networks, transfer learning and domain adaptation - have been applied to address the persistent challenges of EEG-based BCI. While each of these paradigms has achieved progress, they remain conventional models, limited in key respects: struggling to generalise across subjects, require lengthy calibration, and are highly sensitive to noise and data scarcity. These limitations have motivated increasing attention toward meta-learning (MeL), which offers a principled alternative. Rather than learning a single task or domain, MeL models instead *learn how to learn* [16-17]. Trained over a variety of related tasks, they aim to adapt efficiently to new, unseen tasks or source domains with minimal data [16]. Three broad families of MeL methods are typically distinguished:

- *Optimisation-based* approaches, which learn an optimised weight initialization that can be rapidly fine-tuned to new tasks with only a few gradient updates [18].

- *Metric-based approaches*, which learn an embedding space in which new samples are classified by their similarity to reference examples [19].

- *Bayesian/inference-based* approaches, which learn to infer task-specific models directly, often in a single forward pass, while also modelling predictive uncertainty [20].

Within EEG/BCI research, MeL has gained traction as researchers are able to frame each subject, or even each EEG recording session (as noise/artefacts differ between sessions) as a distinct task that the model is trained to generalise across [21-22]. This paradigm enables models to meta-learn how to calibrate for new subjects with only minimal data while maintaining high predictive performance. In what follows, we revisit the five key issues in BCI research and examine how MeL offers potential pathways to address each of them.

#### A. Low SNR

Traditional EEG models often struggle to cope with the high variability introduced by artefacts, physiological impedance, and environmental noise. Within a MeL framework, these variations can be reframed as task-specific features rather than confounding factors. By treating each subject's noise profile as part of the unique task representation, MeL models integrate noise adaptation into the process of task learning itself. In effect, adjusting to different SNR conditions becomes part of the model's generalisation ability, enabling more robust inference across recordings with heterogeneous noise levels [20], [24], [25].

#### B. Low subject/trial counts

Conventional machine learning methods require large datasets to achieve generalisation; EEG research rarely affords this luxury. MeL, however, is explicitly designed to learn from limited data by adopting a support-query training paradigm. A small subset of trials (the support set) is used to establish a preliminary task representation, while the remaining data (the query set) is used to refine and evaluate this representation [19-21]. Crucially, this paradigm forms the basis of both training and testing, making effective use of scarce data, as models are trained to effectively classify data from just a few labelled trials. While low subject counts remain a constraint, reframing each subject as a distinct task allows the model to harness inter-subject variation as a source of learning, rather than having to overcome it as noise or requiring subject-specific models [22].

#### C. Generalisation across subjects

Generalisation remains one of the greatest challenges for BCI. MeL models are expressly designed to consolidate knowledge across tasks, and when subjects are defined as tasks, this capacity directly translates into improved cross-subject generalisation. In practice, this is often achieved through support-query sampling [18-20], [23]. Optimization-based methods like Model-Agnostic-Meta-Learning (MAML) explicitly simulate subject variation by treating different individuals as separate meta-tasks, while inference-based approaches adapt parameters directly to capture task-specific structure [26]. These mechanisms reduce the risk of overfitting to a single subject's idiosyncrasies and instead highlight features that are broadly useful across individuals. Still, defining what constitutes a "task" is not trivial; performance can vary significantly depending on whether tasks are constructed at the subject, session, or experimental condition level. Poor task formulation may weaken the ability of MeL to

generalize, making it a crucial design choice in BCI-focused research [22], [25].

#### D. Adaptation/Calibration

Calibration time has long been a bottleneck for BCI adoption outside clinical research. Non-MeL models often require hours of subject-specific data collection before achieving reliable performance. By contrast, MeL approaches are typically evaluated in few-shot settings, where adaptation occurs with as few as 1-20 labelled trials per class [21], [19]. During training, MeL models are often tested under LOSO evaluation [22-24]. This mirrors real-world BCI deployment, where minimal calibration time is critical. As a result, MeL represents a step toward BCI systems that are immediately usable after brief calibration sessions. Still, the quality and representativeness of these few calibration trials is critical; poorly labelled or unrepresentative support data can significantly degrade performance, limiting the reliability of MeL adaptation in uncontrolled environments [21].

#### E. Real-world robustness

Although MeL does not eliminate the challenges posed by the gap between clinical and real-world environments, it provides models with an inherent robustness to variation. Having already learned to adapt across tasks with differing levels of noise and artefacts, MeL models are better positioned to cope with uncontrolled recording conditions. Empirical studies suggest they outperform conventional models even without being explicitly designed for real-world deployment [23], [25].

In summary, while conventional AI and ML methods continue to provide valuable contributions, MeL models offer a uniquely coherent framework for addressing the diverse and persistent challenges of EEG-based BCI research. By reframing noise, data scarcity, and subject heterogeneity as integral aspects of task variation, MeL enables models to adapt quickly and generalise effectively in ways that conventional approaches struggle to achieve [16-17], [21]. Limitations remain, particularly in task definition, data quality, and the demands of real-world deployment. Any of these elements, if constructed or understood incorrectly, can quickly reduce model capability. However, the capacity of MeL to unify solutions across issues as fundamental as low SNR, limited trials, cross-subject transfer, calibration, and robustness highlights its importance, and sheds light on its growing significance in the field. To illustrate these points in practice, the next section examines two representative MeL models, MAML-EEG and Adaptive Bayesian Meta-Learning (ABML) [27], and compares their performance against non-meta-learning baselines.

### III. META-LEARNING COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Building on this conceptual foundation, we now turn to concrete implementations of meta-learning in EEG-based BCI. By examining two recent meta-learning models, MAML-EEG and ABML as representative case studies, we can observe how different strands of MeL, optimization-based and Bayesian-inference-based, translate these theoretical advantages into practical performance gains on benchmark datasets [26-27].

#### A. MAML-EEG (BCI IV-2b)

MAML-EEG applies a model-agnostic MeL framework to motor imagery decoding, explicitly addressing the issue of

cross-subject generalisation. By simulating subject shift during training, constructing virtual meta-tasks by splitting subjects into pseudo-train and pseudo-test groups, it ensures that the optimization process is directly oriented toward robustness on unseen individuals. This design targets two key challenges:

- *Generalisation across subjects*: By repeatedly exposing the model to subject heterogeneity during training, MAML-EEG avoids overfitting subject-specific idiosyncrasies.

- *Adaptation/Calibration*: Unlike conventional subject-dependent models, MAML-EEG aims for zero-shot generalisation, requiring no fine-tuning on new subjects.

Applied to BCI Competition IV-2b, MAML-EEG achieved an average subject-independent accuracy of 83.98%, substantially higher than many non-meta-learning LOSO baselines. For comparison, W. Zhao, et al's Convolutional Transformer Network (CTNet) reported 76.27% [28], A. Keutayeva, et al's Compact Convolutional Transformer (EEGCCT) achieved 70.12% [29], and even the stronger SVM-enhanced attention framework reached approximately 81.47% [30]. Thus, MAML-EEG not only outperformed conventional LOSO approaches but also exceeded the performance of more complex deep learning architectures, all while requiring no subject-specific calibration. These results underscore the value of optimization-based MeL in directly addressing cross-subject generalisation and reducing the adaptation burden inherent to most BCI pipelines. Table I lists comparative results for the discussed models on BCI Competition IV-2b.

TABLE I. MAML-EEG BCI COMP IV 2B COMPARISON TABLE

<i>Model</i>	<i>Accuracy (%)</i>
MAML-EEG [26]	83.98
SVM-enhanced Attention [30]	~81.47
CTNet [28]	76.27
EEGCCT [29]	70.12

#### B. ABML (BCI IV-2a)

ABML provides a complementary perspective by embedding task adaptation within a probabilistic inference framework. Unlike MAML-EEG's optimization-driven adaptation, ABML generates task-specific parameters via amortized variational inference, enabling flexible and instance level learning. Its contributions map closely onto several of the core BCI issues:

- *Low SNR*: ABML integrates a time and frequency-aware representation encoder, guided by an information bottleneck principle, which explicitly disentangles signal features from noise.

- *Low subject/trial counts*: By adaptively constructing support sets matched to the query distribution, ABML maximises the value of scarce labelled trials.

- *Generalisation across subjects*: The adaptive task-construction mechanism ensures that inter-subject heterogeneity is reframed as a meta-learning problem rather than a confounding factor.

On BCI Competition IV-2a, ABML obtained an average LOSO accuracy of 81.25%, ranking among the strongest reported results for this dataset. Compared with non-meta-learning baselines, ABML clearly surpassed CTNet (58.64%) [28] and EEGCCT (69.14%) [29] and was competitive with the SVM-enhanced attention model (77.43%) [30]. These findings suggest that ABML’s adaptive task construction and time-frequency aware representation learning provide a decisive advantage in low-SNR, data-limited conditions. Importantly, ABML matches or exceeds the performance of carefully engineered domain-specific architectures while retaining the flexibility of a Bayesian meta-learning framework, highlighting its effectiveness for subject-independent EEG classification. Table II lists the comparative results for the models discussed on BCI Competition IV-2a.

TABLE II. ABML BCI COMP IV 2A COMPARISON TABLE

<i>Model</i>	<i>Accuracy (%)</i>
ABML [27]	81.25
SVM-enhanced Attention [30]	77.43
CTNet [28]	58.64
EEGCCT [29]	69.14

### C. Comparative Perspective

Together, these results reinforce the complementary strengths of optimization and inference-based MeL strategies. MAML-EEG demonstrates that optimization-based meta-learning can achieve state-of-the-art subject-independent accuracy on BCI IV-2b (83.98%), outperforming both transformer-style baselines and attention-based CNN-LSTM models. ABML, meanwhile, shows that Bayesian inference-driven meta-learning yields highly competitive results on BCI IV-2a (81.25%), surpassing most conventional approaches and rivaling advanced attention-enhanced architectures. In both cases, MeL models deliver or exceed the best LOSO accuracies reported by non-meta-learning methods - both in few and zero shot settings - providing compelling evidence that meta-learning can unify solutions to the persistent challenges of subject-independence, noise, and data scarcity in BCI research.

## IV. CONCLUSION

This paper foregrounded five critical barriers in EEG-based BCI research-low SNR, data scarcity, cross-subject generalization, calibration demands, and real-world robustness - underscoring the divide between laboratory performance and real-world BCI applicability. We believe meta-learning as a unifying methodological solution: by treating subjects or sessions as tasks, MeL frameworks can embed noise adaptation, leverage minimal per-subject data, generate generalisable representations, and reduce calibration time via support-query training structures.

Our exploration of MAML-EEG and ABML validated these claims empirically. MAML-EEG achieved a remarkable 83.98% subject-independent accuracy on BCI IV-2b without any per-subject fine-tuning, outperforming CTNet, EEGCCT, and SVM-enhanced attention baselines. Similarly, ABML delivered 81.25% on BCI IV-2a, excelling in low-SNR and data-limited regimes and matching sophisticated architectures

with the flexibility of Bayesian inference. Looking forward, several promising research directions emerge:

- *Task Construction and Multi-level Meta-learning*: Investigate continuity across subjects, sessions, and conditions-possibly using meta-task hierarchies or multi-task learning synergies.

- *Zero-Calibration & Automated Frameworks*: Integrate meta-learning libraries such as EEG-Reptile to streamline fine-tuning and hyperparameter optimization for practical deployment.

- *Cross-domain and Out-of-Distribution Robustness*: Extend the MeL paradigm to other modalities (e.g., P300, SSVEP) and future real-world scenarios, learning to generalize across novel noise types and recording conditions.

- *Scalability & Efficiency*: Emphasize methods that reduce computational overhead (e.g., first-order approximations, episodic freezing) and enhance explainability - a key step towards regulatory and clinical translation.

In summary, MeL not only holds promise as a tool for addressing individual BCI challenges but also offers a strategic pathway toward developing EEG-BCI systems that are adaptable, resilient, and user friendly-paving the way for real-world neurotechnology applications that can genuinely learn to learn.

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