Proceedings of CONF-SPML 2026 Symposium: The 2nd Neural Computing and Applications Workshop 2025
DOI: 10.54254/2755-2721/2026.TJ29860

Fine-Tuning Vision–Language Models for Science-Oriented Visual Question Answering

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Abstract. Visual Question Answering (VQA) is a complex task that has progressed from early neural pipelines to multimodal large language models (MLLMs). However, current systems often depend on dataset biases instead of true reasoning. This issue is particularly clear in scientific problem-solving, where a multimodal understanding is crucial. To tackle this, benchmarks like MMMU-Pro impose stricter multimodal dependencies by embedding questions and answers into images and reducing text-only shortcuts. This approach leads to significant drops in performance for state-of-the-art models. Furthermore, this thesis examines Low-Rank Adaptation (LoRA) as an efficient fine-tuning method for adapting vision-language models (VLMs) to MMMU-Pro. In general, we evaluated five representative models using a selected subset of the benchmark: GLM-4.1V-Thinking, Qwen2.5-VL-7B, MiniCPM-V-2.6, LLaVA-1.6-Vicuna-7B, and LLaMA-3.2-Vision. The results show consistent accuracy improvements, with GLM-4.1V-Thinking achieving the largest gain of 4.38%. Broadly speaking, we think that these findings confirm LoRA's effectiveness in improving multimodal reasoning. Last, we emphasize the need for further progress in model designs and reasoning methods to strengthen scientific VQA.

Keywords: Supervised fine-tuning(SFT), VQA, Multimodal, LLM

1. Introduction

Visual Question Answering (VQA) is a task in which a large language model is expected to give a natural language response under the input of a picture and a normal request. In recent years, VQA has gone through lots of changes. from the early neural network pipelines to modern multimodal large language models (MLLMs) that manipulate sophisticated attention mechanisms [1]. These advances enabled us to have a more effective integration of both visual and textual information. However, limitations still remain in VQA when it comes to reasoning depth and generalization.

Specifically, Recent work shows that models often rely on superficial biases in datasets instead of true multimodal reasoning. Ma et al. [2], in Look, Listen, and Answer: Overcoming Biases for Audio-Visual Question Answering, for example, proposed a debiasing framework that demonstrates even advanced models depend on misleading correlations. Ye et al. [3] further explained that matching textual queries with key audio-visual features is crucial to avoid shallow feature matching. Other methods, like progressive spatio-temporal attention [4] and source-aware semantic

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DOI: 10.54254/2755-2721/2026.TJ29860

representation networks [5], have improved multimodal alignment, but they still struggle with reasoning-heavy, domain-specific tasks. On the other hand, broader surveys [6] confirm that top systems still find it hard to generalize across modalities and domains, further highlighting the need for better benchmarks.

That being said, we propose that benchmarks like MMMU-Pro [7] meet this need by enforcing genuine multimodal dependencies. On top of that, MMMU-Pro uses a stricter data construction method, removing questions that can be solved with text alone, also expanding answer options to minimize guessing, and embedding questions directly into images. When compared to the original MMMU dataset, models show a 16.8% to 26.9% drop in performance. This illustrates the benchmark's difficulty and its importance for testing reasoning in scientific VQA tasks.

In addition to creating challenging benchmarks, we chose Low-Rank Adaptation (LoRA) as our adjustment strategy. For a considerable time, Adjustment strategies have been vital for improving multimodal reasoning. When choosing an adjustment strategy for finetuning, we figured that traditional full-parameter finetuning is costly, especially for billion-scale LLMs. Low-Rank Adaptation (LoRA), on the other hand, has become an efficient alternative, allowing parameter-efficient finetuning by adding low-rank trainable matrices into transformer layers [8]. On top of that, Subsequent work has expanded LoRA's effectiveness in multimodal and domain-specific settings. For example, Zheng et al [9] showed that LoRA enables strong finetuning for cross-modal retrieval tasks, while Wang et al. [10] proved its efficiency in adapting vision-language models for scientific VQA. Similarly, Kojima et al. [11] suggested domain-adaptive LoRA variations that help reduce overfitting in specialized benchmarks. These findings make LoRA an appealing choice for scaling VQA models to demanding datasets like MMMU-Pro, where efficiency and specialization are equally important.

In summary, we find that earlier research indicates that while multimodal reasoning methods have made significant progress, current models still don't achieve true reasoning when assessed on rigorous benchmarks. At the same time, LoRA-based finetuning offers a promising approach for efficient adaptation of large multimodal models. Our contribution builds on these findings by evaluating LoRA-finetuned models on MMMU-Pro, aiming to connect benchmark difficulty with model reasoning ability.

2. Related work

2.1. Vision-language models for VQA

Visual Question Answering (VQA) began with convolutional and recurrent neural network pipelines that mapped images to text answers, but these early models showed limited reasoning ability. Today's methods use multimodal large language models and attention mechanisms for better integration of visual and textual information.

Recent developments in multimodal reasoning focus on models like GLM-4.1V-Thinking and Qwen2.5-VL-7B, which have hybrid architectures combining vision transformers with large language models. Liu et al. [12] introduced the GLM framework as a general-purpose multimodal reasoning model, using reinforcement learning and curriculum sampling to enhance stepwise reasoning [13]. Similarly, Zhou et al. [14] tested attention mechanisms in Qwen2.5-VL, presenting the gain of detailed multimodal alignment in special domains, such as scientific tasks. MiniCPM-V-2.6 focuses on efficiency and adopts lighter vision encoders, e.g., SigLip-400M, while maintaining multimodal understanding [15,16].

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In addition to model architecture, two important topics are attention mechanism and feature alignment. Chen & Xie [17] investigated the attention in the VQA task for different domains, and found that by focusing on important cross-modal cues, performance improvement can be achieved. Huang & Zhang [18] also explored the idea of aligning visual and text features by proposing cross-modality correlation distillation, where they showed their approaches can improve the performance of the scientific reasoning task. These works demonstrate that attention-based techniques become increasingly complex to manage, while leaving open some relevant difficulties to overcome in solving difficult, domain-specific problems.

2.2. Fine-tuning and domain-specific adaptation

We have found fine-tuning on big VLMs of crucial for domain-specific tasks, such as science-oriented VQA. Luo et al. [19] demonstrated that instruction fine-tuning of GLM-4.1V-Thinking with LoRA improves scientific reasoning quite effectively. Li et al. [20] also demonstrate that fine-tuning Qwen2.5-VL for domain-specific tasks can enhance benchmarks, and point out that specific fine-tuning is needed. Cheng et al. Furthermore [17], pointed out the significance of specialty datasets, MMMU-Pro, which excludes from the set of questions those whose answers do not depend on the images, and also set up a stringent assessment to measure the scientific reasoning abilities.

LoRA has been an increasingly popular fine-tuning methodology owing to its efficiency and scalability. Hu et al. [8] initially proposed LoRA as a low-rank adaptation approach for large language models, enabling parameter-efficient fine-tuning. Subsequent works further developed the theoretical and practical understanding of LoRA: Zeng & Lee [21] explored its power of expression, Zhang et al. [22] proposed LoRA-FA to fine-tune with a smaller memory footprint, and Wang et al. [23] proposed LoRA-GA that adds gradient approximation for reduced computational cost. These papers broadly position LoRA as a critical technique for tailoring VLMs to domain-focused reasoning tasks.

2.3. Audio-Visual Question Answering (AVQA)

The audio-visual QA offers complementary insights into the general challenges in multimodal reasoning. Ma et al. [2] introduced the debiased framework in Look, Listen, and Answer, and demonstrated that the models tend to rely on statistical tricks rather than logic. Ye et al. [3] followed by proposing to distill correlation mutual across the modality to help enhance inference performance for more diverse types of questions. Li et al. Geng [4] proposed a progressive spatio-temporal perception (PSTP-Net) that attends only meaningful locations, and Yang et al. [5] proposed a source-aware semantic representation network (SaSR-Net) to boost feature composition.

Phukan et al. [6] reviewed multilingual AVQA, emphasizing the ongoing challenge of generalizing across tasks and languages. These insights reinforce the need for benchmarks like MMMU-Pro, which are specifically designed to prevent exploitative use of datasets.

2.4. Challenges and future directions

While remarkable progress has been made, existing VQA models and AVQA models tend to succeed without using real multimodal reasoning, but without a full understanding of the visual and linguistic information. We found the pattern-based reasoning or correlation in the visual–linguistic space that happened in datasets is likely to result in correct answer generation instead of a logical

DOI: 10.54254/2755-2721/2026.TJ29860

process in the manual review [24]. In this regard, a better reward model that considers reasoning quality and the prediction accuracy at the same time is needed.

We expect future studies may concentrate on (i) more effective reasoning components [18], (ii) more efficient fine-tuning methods like LoRA (Hu et al., 2021; [22], (iii) reinforcement learning on reasoning consistency [24] and (iv) specific benchmark on domains (e.g. MMMU-Pro [6] etc., which all work together toward more effective multimodal reasoning towards veridical integration of vision and text, particularly in sciences.

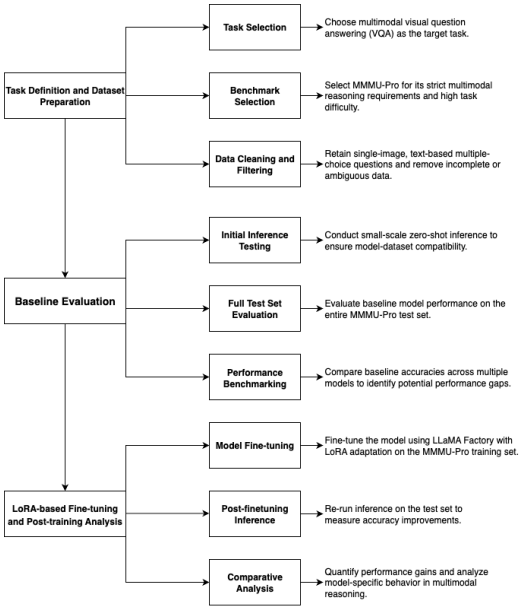


Figure 1. Workflow

2.5. Model overview

GLM-4.1V-Thinking is an advanced vision-language model jointly developed by Zhipu AI and Tsinghua University, designed to enhance multimodal reasoning. Its key innovation lies in a reasoning-centric training framework that integrates supervised fine-tuning with Reinforcement Learning with Curriculum Sampling (RLCS). Furthermore, the model introduces explicit chain-of-thought (CoT) outputs, structuring responses into clear reasoning steps and final answers, which directly supports reasoning optimization and downstream evaluation. Leveraging these designs, GLM-4.1V-Thinking achieves state-of-the-art performance on 23 out of 28 multimodal benchmarks under 10B parameters and even surpasses larger models on tasks involving STEM reasoning, chart understanding, and long-document comprehension.

Qwen2.5-VL-7B is a mid-scale, open-weight vision-language model developed by Alibaba Cloud's Tongyi Qianwen team. It is one of the models in the Qwen2.5-VL series, which has 3B, 7B, and 72B parameters.

The model's core architecture consists of three main modules: the LLM decoder based on the Qwen2.5 transformer backbone, the vision transformer (ViT) encoder, and the MLP-based vision-language merger. It adopts advanced technologies such as dynamic resolution and frame rate training, and a streamlined and efficient vision encoder, which makes it more efficient and accurate in processing multimodal data.

MiniCPM-V-2.6 is a multimodal large language model (MLLM) developed by FaceWall Intelligence, focusing on efficient visual-text understanding and generation. Built on the SigLip-

DOI: 10.54254/2755-2721/2026.TJ29860

400M (visual encoder) and Qwen2-7B (language decoder) architectures, with a total parameter size of ~8B.Adopts an advanced Transformer-based fusion design to process text, images, and videos simultaneously, then outputs coherent text responses.

LLaVA-1.6-Vicuna-7B is an open-weight multimodal large language model from the LLaVA-Next family, developed by the LLaVA research team. It is designed to integrate the capabilities of multimodal reasoning and fine-grained image understanding with its base language decoder - Vicuna-7B-v1.5. Compared to LLaVA-1.5, it supports input images with resolution up to 4x more pixels; besides that, it has better visual reasoning, OCR, visual conversation, world knowledge, and logical reasoning capabilities.

The architecture of LLaVA-1.6-7B-Vicuna consists of Vision Encoder - CLIP ViT-L/14; Multimodal Projection Layer - an MLP projector that aligns vision features into the token space of the language model; Language Decoder: Vicuna-7B, a conversationally fine-tuned LLaMA-based model.

Llama-3.2-Vision is a multimodal model in the Llama 3 family, developed by Meta AI.

It is specifically designed for efficient multimodal understanding and reasoning by natively supporting both image and text modalities within a unified Transformer backbone.

The model's architecture consists of: Unified Vision Encoder - a highly optimized vision transformer (ViT) trained jointly with the language backbone; Cross-Modal Fusion Layer - a lightweight attention-based integration layer that merges vision features directly into the token space, enabling joint reasoning; Language Decoder - Llama-3.2

3. Dataset

MMMU-Pro (Massive Multi-discipline Multimodal Understanding – Pro) is an enhanced benchmark designed to rigorously evaluate the multimodal reasoning capabilities of large language models (LLMs). Compared to the original MMMU dataset, MMMU-Pro adopts a stricter data construction pipeline that aims to better reflect real-world visual–textual understanding challenges (See Fig.1). The refinement process involves three main steps:

Problems that can be trivially solved through textual context alone are removed. This ensures that the remaining samples genuinely require visual input in order to be answered.

Option Enhancement: The answer set is expanded and refined, making it more difficult for models to rely on superficial patterns or elimination strategies. This reduces the chance of guessing and emphasizes true comprehension.

Visual Input Setting, Questions, and candidate options are embedded directly into images (e.g., screenshots, exam problems, diagrams). This setup forces the model to simultaneously process visual and textual information, simulating human-like multimodal cognition.

As a result, MMMU-Pro significantly raises the bar for multimodal benchmarks. Empirical studies show that state-of-the-art models experience a substantial performance drop (16.8%–26.9%) on MMMU-Pro compared to the original MMMU benchmark, underscoring its difficulty. Additional analyses reveal that explicit OCR prompting provides limited benefit, whereas chain-of-thought reasoning tends to improve accuracy.

Subset Used in Our Experiments

For our experiments, we curated a subset of MMMU-Pro consisting exclusively of single-image, four-option multiple-choice questions. This setup simplifies evaluation while retaining the benchmark's multimodal complexity. The dataset split is as follows:

Total samples: 1,592

Training set (MMMUPro_train.json): 1,273 samples

DOI: 10.54254/2755-2721/2026.TJ29860

Test set (MMMUPro_test.json): 319 samples

Each instance contains a single image, a question, and four candidate answers labeled A–D. The task is to select the correct option based on both the visual and textual content of the sample.

This subset maintains the core challenges of MMMU-Pro: Authentic multimodal dependency – Images contain essential information that cannot be inferred from text alone. Broad disciplinary coverage – Problems are drawn from multiple fields, preventing domain-specific shortcuts. Standardized evaluation – The multiple-choice format allows direct and comparable accuracy measurement across different models.

By splitting the dataset into training and testing partitions, we enable both fine-tuning experiments and robust evaluation of cutting-edge multimodal models. This provides a controlled yet challenging environment for benchmarking progress in visual–textual reasoning.

4. Experiment

4.1. Dataset

We evaluate the model on a curated subset of MMMU-Pro (Massive Multi-discipline Multimodal Understanding – Pro), a benchmark designed to assess advanced multimodal reasoning. Compared to the original MMMU dataset, MMMU-Pro is substantially more challenging due to its stricter data construction pipeline, which includes:

Filtering (See Fig.1): Removing samples solvable via textual context alone to enforce genuine multimodal dependency. Option Enhancement: Expanding and refining candidate answers to reduce bias from superficial patterns. Visual Input Integration: Embedding questions and options directly into images to simulate realistic exam-like conditions.

For our experiments, we use the following split:

Total samples: 1,592

Training set: 1,273

Test set: 319

Task format: Single-image multiple-choice questions with four options (A–D) requiring both textual and visual reasoning.

4.2. Fine-tuning setup

To adapt GLM-4.1V-Thinking to the MMMU-Pro benchmark, we perform instruction fine-tuning using LoRA (Low-Rank Adaptation). The fine-tuning setup is based on LLaMA-Factory, with the following configurations:

Key hyperparameters:

Learning rate: 5\times10^{-5}

LoRA targets: q_proj, v_proj

Batch size: 2 per device, with gradient accumulation = 8

Cutoff length: 2048 tokens

Epochs: 5

Validation split: 10%

Precision: fp16

DOI: 10.54254/2755-2721/2026.TJ29860

4.3. Evaluation protocol

We design a custom evaluation script(See Fig.1) to measure the model's performance on the MMMU-Pro test set: Input Construction: Each test sample contains an image, a question, and four candidate answers (A–D). Prediction Generation: The model outputs reasoning and final answers in a standardized format with <|begin_of_box|>…<|end_of_box|>. Answer Extraction: The predicted answer is parsed and compared with the ground-truth label. Metrics: We report accuracy as the primary evaluation metric.

4.4. Experimental results

The experimental results are summarized (Table 1):

Table 1. Experimental results

Model Version	Model Name	Test Samples	Correct	Wrong	Accuracy
Baseline (pre-finetuning)	GLM-4.1V-Thinking	319	134	185	42.01%
Fine-tuned (ours)	GLM-4.1V-Thinking	319	148	171	46.39%
Baseline (pre-finetuning)	Qwen2.5-VL-7B	319	102	217	31.97%
Fine-tuned (ours)	Qwen2.5-VL-7B	319	110	209	34.48%
Baseline (pre-finetuning)	MiniCPM-V-2.6	319	96	223	30.09%
Fine-tuned (ours)	MiniCPM-V-2.6	319	104	215	32.6%
Baseline (pre-finetuning)	LLaVA-1.6-Vicuna-7B	319	95	224	29.78%
Fine-tuned (ours)	LLaVA-1.6-Vicuna-7B	319	101	218	31.66%
Baseline (pre-finetuning)	Llama-3.2-Vision	319	146	173	45.77%
Fine-tuned (ours)	Llama-3.2-Vision	319	120	199	37.62%

After fine-tuning, the best model achieves a 4.38% absolute accuracy improvement on the MMMU-Pro benchmark, demonstrating the effectiveness of task-specific instruction fine-tuning.

5. Discussion

To evaluate the effectiveness of LoRA-based fine-tuning on multimodal reasoning tasks, we conducted experiments on five representative vision-language models (GLM-4.1V-Thinking, Qwen2.5-VL-7B, MiniCPM-V-2.6, LLaVA-1.6-Vicuna-7B, and LLaMA-3.2-Vision) using the MMMU-Pro benchmark. The results reveal several key findings:

5.1. Overall performance improvement

Across all models, LoRA fine-tuning consistently improves accuracy, demonstrating its effectiveness in adapting models to the complex multimodal reasoning challenges posed by MMMU-Pro.

GLM-4.1V-Thinking achieves the highest accuracy improvement, from 42.01% to 46.39% (+4.38%), indicating that its architecture is already well-aligned with multimodal reasoning tasks. Qwen2.5-VL-7B and MiniCPM-V-2.6 show moderate but stable gains (+2.51%), suggesting limited fine-tuning adaptability due to architectural and pre-training constraints. LLaVA-1.6-Vicuna-7B and

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LLaMA-3.2-Vision also benefit from fine-tuning but exhibit smaller improvements compared to GLM, reflecting differences in model capacity and pre-training objectives.

5.2. Factors influencing fine-tuning performance

5.2.1. Pre-training foundation and task alignment

The baseline performance gap (e.g., GLM-4.1V-Thinking at 42.01% vs. MiniCPM-V-2.6 at 30.09%) likely arises from differences in pre-training data coverage and task objectives. Models pre-trained on diverse multimodal datasets tend to perform better under zero-shot conditions and adapt more effectively during fine-tuning.

5.2.2. Model capacity and architectural design

Larger models with stronger multimodal encoders and better visual-textual alignment mechanisms (e.g., GLM-4.1V-Thinking) consistently outperform smaller models, both before and after fine-tuning. Conversely, lightweight models like MiniCPM show lower baseline performance but still achieve noticeable gains after adaptation.

5.2.3. Fine-tuning efficiency and adaptability

The magnitude of performance improvements (GLM > Qwen ≈ MiniCPM > LLaVA ≈ LLaMA) reflects differences in how effectively each model integrates LoRA updates. Models optimized for parameter-efficient fine-tuning benefit more from this approach, while others remain constrained by architectural limitations.

5.3. Impact of MMMU-Pro's difficulty

Despite consistent accuracy gains, the overall performance remains below 50% for all models. This highlights the high difficulty of MMMU-Pro, which enforces strict multimodal dependencies and covers diverse scientific and domain-specific contexts. These characteristics prevent models from exploiting superficial dataset patterns and make MMMU-Pro a more reliable benchmark for evaluating true multimodal reasoning capabilities.

LoRA fine-tuning is effective for improving multimodal reasoning, but the extent of improvement varies across models. GLM-4.1V-Thinking demonstrates the best adaptability, benefiting from a well-optimized multimodal architecture and diverse pre-training. Models with smaller capacity or limited multimodal pre-training (e.g., MiniCPM) require more specialized fine-tuning strategies to close the performance gap. Moreover, MMMU-Pro's complexity highlights that current VLMs still face significant challenges in integrating multimodal signals for scientific and domain-specific reasoning.

5.4. Summary

Our findings suggest that LoRA-based fine-tuning provides a parameter-efficient yet effective approach for adapting vision-language models to complex multimodal benchmarks. However, the relatively modest accuracy levels achieved across all models indicate that further advancements in model architectures, cross-modal alignment, and reasoning mechanisms are necessary to fully unlock multimodal reasoning potential.

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6. Conclusion

In this study, we investigated the effectiveness of LoRA-based fine-tuning for adapting vision-language models (VLMs) to complex multimodal reasoning tasks using the MMMU-Pro benchmark. Our experiments covered five representative models, including GLM-4.1V-Thinking, Qwen2.5-VL-7B, MiniCPM-V-2.6, LLaVA-1.6-Vicuna-7B, and LLaMA-3.2-Vision, and evaluated their performance before and after fine-tuning.

The results demonstrate that LoRA fine-tuning consistently improves accuracy across all models, though the extent of improvement varies. Among the tested models, GLM-4.1V-Thinking achieved the best performance, improving from 42.01% to 46.39%, indicating that its architecture and pre-training objectives are highly aligned with multimodal reasoning tasks. In contrast, smaller models such as MiniCPM-V-2.6 and Qwen2.5-VL-7B exhibited more limited gains due to lower multimodal alignment and reduced model capacity.

Despite these improvements, overall accuracy remains below 50% for all models, highlighting the high difficulty of MMMU-Pro and the limitations of current VLMs in handling complex scientific and domain-specific reasoning tasks. This underscores the need for further advancements in cross-modal representation learning, reasoning strategies, and benchmark-driven evaluation to achieve robust multimodal understanding.

7. Future work

Building on these findings, future work will focus on the following directions:

7.1. Model optimization

Investigate advanced fine-tuning strategies beyond LoRA, such as prefix-tuning, adapter-tuning, and multi-stage optimization, to further enhance parameter efficiency and reasoning performance. Explore reinforcement learning-based alignment techniques to improve step-by-step reasoning consistency.

7.2. Dataset expansion and benchmark diversity

Extend evaluation to more diverse multimodal datasets spanning scientific VQA, diagram understanding, and real-world multimodal tasks. Incorporate datasets with more cross-modal dependencies to better measure the generalizability of fine-tuned models.

7.3. Architectural innovation

Design lightweight yet expressive VLM architectures capable of handling high-dimensional visual inputs and long-context textual reasoning. Investigate hybrid architectures that integrate chain-of-thought (CoT) prompting with multimodal alignment modules.

7.4. Ablation studies and interpretability

Conduct comprehensive ablation experiments to analyze the effects of training data size, model components, and fine-tuning configurations. Develop interpretability tools to visualize attention maps and reasoning paths, enabling deeper insights into how models handle multimodal inputs.

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