Soundwave T: Less is More for Speech-Text Alignment in LLMs

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Abstract

Existing end-to-end speech large language models (LLMs) usually rely on large-scale annotated data for training, while data-efficient training has not been discussed in depth. We focus on two fundamental problems between speech and text: the representation space gap and sequence length inconsistency. We propose Soundwave, which utilizes an efficient training strategy and a novel architecture to address these issues. Results show that Soundwave outperforms other advanced speech LLMs in speech translation and AIR-Bench speech tasks with only a fraction of the training data. Further analysis shows that Soundwave still retains its intelligence during conversation.

1 Introduction

Large language models (LLMs) have profoundly transformed the paradigm of natural language processing (NLP) due to their remarkable abilities in understanding and reasoning (Achiam et al., 2023; Touvron et al., 2023). Recently, multi-modal LLMs have also shown rapid development, with the success of GPT-40 highlighting the potential of speechfocused LLMs (Hurst et al., 2024). A fundamental requirement for achieving seamless communication with LLMs is their ability to accurately interpret speech—essentially enabling LLMs to "hear".

However, most speech-based LLMs rely on massive labeled datasets and substantial computational resources to enable speech perception (Défossez et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2025). For example, the Qwen2-Audio (Chu et al., 2024) model requires approximately 500,000 hours of data to achieve crossmodal functionality, while 1,000 hours is needed by advanced automatic speech recognition models to achieve comparable results (Gulati et al., 2020). This discrepancy underscores the need for more efficient methods to develop speech-capable LLMs.



Figure 1: AIR-Bench speech foundation tasks.

We first identify two fundamental challenges to achieve alignment between speech and text (Zhang et al., 2023): (1) the representation space gap and (2) sequence length inconsistency. The former challenge arises from the two modalities being developed independently, while the second challenge stems from the difference in modeling units—speech is typically represented at the frame level, whereas LLMs operate at the sub-word level. We then decouple the process of building speech LLMs to achieve more efficient training. Specifically, we propose a two-stage training framework designed to efficiently overcome these challenges. The first stage focuses on resolving the representation space gap, while the second stage aims to reduce the sequence length of speech.

Furthermore, to efficiently bridge the gap between speech and text, the quality of alignment data plays a crucial role. To address this, we collect high-quality speech recognition data and manually annotate audio labels to support the first stage. For the second stage, we analyze the proportion of text data to ensure a smooth learning process. During the supervised fine-tuning (SFT) stage, we

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Figure 2: Training progress of Soundwave. The gray modules are frozen while the orange modules are updated.

employ temperature sampling to balance the variety of tasks effectively.

We conduct experiments on various speech-totext tasks and several sound-related tasks. We also compare our model with the strong system Qwen2-Audio on both closed- and open-ended tasks. Our average results achieve state-of-the-art performance on the AIR-Bench (Yang et al., 2024) speech foundation task as shown in Fig. 1. It also shows comparable results on audio-related tasks. Furthermore, our method exhibits significant performance in zero-shot speech translation, demonstrating that Soundwave unlocks the full potential of LLMs. Soundwave delivers better performance with less training data, lower training costs, and fewer speech sequences.

Our main **contributions** are as follows. 1) We propose an efficient training framework that utilizes only ten thousand hours of training data to achieve state-of-the-art speech understanding performance. 2) We introduce dynamic multi-task learning in the post-training stage to enhance speech modeling and leverage the benefits of text data. 3) We annotate a sound classification dataset to support the alignment between sound and text, and provide high-quality instruction data based on the thinking process for speech LLMs.

2 Methodology

2.1 Overall Design

The training process consists of three stages, as shown in Fig. 2. Stage I aims to align the representation between speech and text, addressing the *representation space gap* problem. Stage II primarily shrinks the speech sequence and mitigates the *sequence length inconsistency*. The supervised fine-tuning (SFT) stage (Wei et al., 2021) enables Table 1: The parameters of different modules. Theorange represents the number of training parameters.

Modules	#Param.	Training stage	Details
Audio encoder	$\sim 635 M$	-	Whisper Large V3
Alignment adapter	~144M	I&II	One projection layer and Transformer
Shrinking adapter	~67M	II	One cross-attention and layer-norm
LLMs	$\sim 8B$	-	Llama3.1
LLM adapter	\sim 55M	II&III	LoRA
Total	$\sim 9B$		

the speech LLMs to generalize across diverse tasks.

The input to the model consists of speech FBank features, which are then processed by the pretrained audio encoder. To efficiently align the representation with that of LLMs, we use the audio encoder that produces semantic features (e.g., Whisper (Radford et al., 2023) or Seamless (Team, 2025)), rather than vector quantization features (Défossez et al., 2022) or self-supervised features (Hsu et al., 2021). We implement an alignment adapter and a shrinking adapter to bridge the gap between speech and text. Additionally, LoRA (Hu et al., 2022) is used to enable efficient fine-tuning. An overview of the modules is provided in Tab. 1.

2.2 Stage I: Alignment

We use the auxiliary CTC loss and high-quality data to improve training efficiency.

2.2.1 Auxiliary CTC loss

The audio encoder and LLMs have a gap in their representation spaces due to separate pre-training. One direct approach is to use ASR tasks for alignment. We design an adapter and utilize CTC loss (Graves et al., 2006) to achieve efficient crossmodal training. Specifically, the adapter consists of a linear layer followed by a Transformer layer (Vaswani, 2017). The linear layer transforms the audio sequence $A \in \mathbb{R}^{l \times h_a}$ where *l* is the length of the speech sequence and h_a is the hidden size of the audio encoder. We concatenate adjacent features and adjust the dimensionality to match that of the LLMs, resulting in $A' \in \mathbb{R}^{l/2 \times h_{llm}}$ where h_{llm} is the hidden size of the LLMs. A Transformer layer then converts the features into the representation space of LLMs. Finally, we use CTC loss to train the adapter, aligning the shared space of the LLMs.

2.2.2 High-quality Alignment Data

We believe that *improving data quality is crucial to training efficiency for alignment*. We apply data strategies for two types of data (ASR and sound data), as outlined below. The adapter is trained without the LLMs at this stage, thus the alignment training is fast. Our later experiments in Sec. 5.4 confirm the benefits to training efficiency.

Verified ASR Data At this training stage, we use transcriptions from ASR data as the target, which we found to be crucial for improving convergence ratio. The selected high-quality data is all verified by advanced ASR model (Radford et al., 2023) with a Word Error Rate (WER) lower than 10%.

Standardized Sound Data Another challenge is processing sound due to the inherent background noise and the diversity of labeling information. To address this, we annotate about 8k pieces of sound category data. We further select clear 20k sound samples, then unify label format and audio length.

2.3 Stage II: Shrinking

After aligning the data representation, we focus on reducing the length of the speech as detailed in Sec. 2.3.1. Additionally, at this stage, we include various types of foundational audio tasks to better generalize downstream tasks. This introduces a data mixture problem, which is solved by a dynamic data mixture strategy (see Sec. 2.3.2).

2.3.1 Dynamic Shrinking

There are two essential aspects to shrinking the audio sequence: *final length determination* and *lossless information retention*.

Final Length Determination For the first aspect, we utilize the probability from CTC. The CTC predicts the corresponding word for each position. We



Figure 3: We first select the features based on the peak of CTC prediction. Then, we use these features to query and gather auxiliary information from the original sequence. Finally, we fuse the two features to achieve shrinking. Note that when gathering the information, the selected positions are masked.

then remove duplicate predictions from adjacent positions to obtain the final sequence. Since the sequence has been aligned to text in Stage I, the decoded result can indicate the final length.

Lossless Information Retention For the second aspect, we select the content based on the CTC output as the query, and then use attention mechanisms to gather related information, such as tone and pitch, in order to prevent information loss.

Assume the speech features x have been aligned to the representation space of LLMs, then, we select the features based on the CTC probability to compress the sequence x'.

$$x_{\text{out}} = \operatorname{norm}\left(x' + \operatorname{cross_attn}(x', x, x)\right) \tag{1}$$

where norm is the layer norm operation. x_{out} is the final output of the shrinking adapter. x' can be viewed as the content feature, while the gathered information, calculated by cross-attention, serves as auxiliary data for the selected features. The whole processing is shown in Fig. 3.

Table 2: The overview of tasks in shrinking stage. The data scales of these data are highly imbalanced.

Task	Input	Output	Size (k)
QA	Text question	Text answer	78
ASR	Speech	Transcription	3,012
ST	Speech	Translation	460
Sound	Mixed speech and sound	Transcription and sound type	25

2.3.2 Dynamic Data Mixture

We select both audio data (involving three basic audio tasks) and text data to enable LLMs to generalize to downstream speech understanding. Training with mixed data may be biased by dominant

Dataset	Ι	II	III	Num.	Hours	Task
GigaSpeech (M) (Chen et al., 2021)	\checkmark	\checkmark		713k	805.11	ASR
TED-LIUM (Hernandez et al., 2018)	\checkmark	\checkmark		144k	244.02	ASR
Multilingual Librispeech (En) (Pratap et al., 2020)	\checkmark	\checkmark		985k	4,081.61	ASR
Europarl-ASR (Garcés Díaz-Munío et al., 2021)	\checkmark	\checkmark		719k	418.42	ASR
TextrolSpeech (Ji et al., 2024b)	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	215k	301.19	ASR, GR ¹ , Emotion Recognition
LibriSpeech (Panayotov et al., 2015)	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	281k	961.05	ASR, Speech Grounding
MUST-C (En-De) (Cattoni et al., 2021)		\checkmark	\checkmark	283k	388.55	Speech Translation
Common Voice (En) (Ardila et al., 2019)		\checkmark	\checkmark	233k	364.64	AP ¹ , Speech Translation
Fisher (Cieri et al., 2004)		\checkmark	\checkmark	132k	1,091.42	ASR, Chat
Europarl-ST (Iranzo-Sánchez et al., 2020)			\checkmark	53k	133.16	Language Identification
Common Voice (Ja) (Ardila et al., 2019)			\checkmark	13k	15.00	Language Identification
SLURP (Bastianelli et al., 2020)			\checkmark	141k	101.49	IC ¹ , Entity Recognition
CREMA-D (Cao et al., 2014)			\checkmark	7k	5.26	Emotion Recognition
RAVDESS (Livingstone and Russo, 2018)			\checkmark	1k	1.48	Emotion Recognition
IEMOCAP (Busso et al., 2008)			\checkmark	3k	2.16	Emotion Recognition
MELD (Poria et al., 2019)			\checkmark	9k	8.12	Emotion Recognition
VoxCeleb (Nagrani et al., 2017)			\checkmark	156k	435.17	Speaker Num. Verification
FoR (Reimao and Tzerpos, 2019)			\checkmark	54k	47.55	Synthesized Detection
AnyInstruct (Zhan et al., 2024)			\checkmark	107k	206.30	Speech Instruction
VocalSound (Gong et al., 2022)	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	20k	23.20	Sound Classification
TUT2017 (Duppada and Hiray, 2017)	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	5k	13.00	Scene Classification
CochlScene (Jeong and Park, 2022)			\checkmark	75k	208.65	Scene Classification
Total ²				4,349k*	9,856.91*	15

Table 3: Summary of datasets used in different stages and their total hours.

¹ GR is for Gender Recognition, AP is for Age Prediction, and IC is for Intent Classification.

 2 '*' means that this table is compiled from the perspective of audio, and an audio file may be used multiple times for different tasks. If multiple usages at different tasks are all counted, the number of data samples is 6301k, and the total duration is 14068.77 hours.

tasks due to data imbalance (see Table 2), and existing work has adopted curriculum learning (Das et al., 2024; Tang et al., 2023), though it requires considerable prior knowledge for proper design.

Inspired by temperature-based data sampling, which has previously been used to address multilingual data imbalance (Arivazhagan et al., 2019), we propose a dynamic data mixture guided by sampling temperature. Specifically, the sample rate for each task k is as follows:

$$p_k = \left(\frac{|\mathcal{D}_k|}{\sum_i |\mathcal{D}_i|}\right)^{\frac{1}{T}}$$
(2)

where the $|\mathcal{D}_k|$ denotes the data size of task k and T denotes the temperature. T is initially set to 1 and gradually increases. This causes the training to start with a *sample-level uniform distribution* and gradually shift to a *task-level uniform distribution*. Training at the former stage might be dominated by rich-source tasks, while at the latter stage, training might be more balanced among tasks, potentially alleviating the over-fitting issue.

Additionally, Chen et al. (2024) shows that textrelated tasks aid instruction following for multimodal LLMs. We also introduce the text task to ensure a smoother cross-modal process. We incorporate the Wizard SFT dataset (Xu et al., 2024) to help speech LLMs retain their understanding capabilities, thereby enhancing their ability to follow instructions for speech tasks.

2.4 Stage III: Supervised Fine-tuning

At this stage, we only fine-tune the parameters of LoRA, as speech and text are already aligned. Our goal is to enable the speech LLMs to handle more complex tasks and respond directly based on the speaker's speech. Thus, we use both text-based and speech-based instructions during SFT.

3 Data Engineering

We introduce the data details for the three stages, respectively, see the summary in Tab. 3. The data shown in the table has been cleaned and filtered, and the details of strategies can be found in App. A.2. We sample some speech from several dataset to control the quality and training cost.

3.1 Data During Stage I and II

ASR Data We choose high-quality datasets and filter the data with a WER of less than 10%, as tested by Whisper medium. We apply SpecAugment (Park et al., 2019) to enhance the robustness of the model towards speech. To help LLMs understand the conversation and the number of speakers,

	Instruction	Answer
1	What feeling is the speaker trying to convey?	Neutral.
2	What is the emotional theme of the speaker's message? Pick one answer from: A. neutral B. fear C. surprise D. happiness.	The one answer you should pick is D. happiness.
3	What emotion is the speaker hinting at in their speech?	The speaker is hinting at surprise in their speech.

Table 4: Examples of three QA formats for building SFT data in the speech emotion task.

we splice speech from different speakers. We denote the output format as The first speaker says ... The second speaker says

Sound Data The sound data is often too short and may be viewed as noise, which causes the model to fail in perceiving it. To address this problem, we embedded environmental sounds into the audio to construct the data. For example: 'But there was a passenger dropped off for you, a little girl. *<throat_clearing>* It's a boy I've come for.' The special token is added to the conversation, and the model needs to transcribe both the sound and speech simultaneously. This method of learning both speech and audio also makes training efficient.

Another problem is that the sound is always a mix of multiple sound categories and exhibits constant repetition. This causes timing and label count issues, which increases the difficulty of learning alignment. Therefore, we standardize the audio to a duration of three seconds based on energy, and manually select and label the data. The detailed process of labeling can be found in our Appendix A.1.

3.2 Instruction Data During Stage III

Text Instructions The text-based instruction is designed to understand and analyze speech. We have created three types of QA formats, as shown in Tab. 4. The first requires the model to directly answer, which is the most difficult. The second provides detailed choices, and the last requires the model to output the answer in a natural format.

Speech Instructions If speech LLMs are to communicate directly with humans, it is essential for them to follow speech instructions. Once the speech is well-aligned, we can achieve this by using text-based dialogue data and synthesizing text into speech. We use AnyInstruct speech subset (Zhan et al., 2024), which is built using this approach.

Chain of Thought To reduce the complexity of some challenging tasks, we built the dataset to enable the model to predict in a manner similar to Chain of Thought (CoT). For example, in the Intent



Figure 4: Adding thought processes to address complicated problems and speech instructions.

Classification task, we first had the model output the speech transcription before identifying the intent, as shown in Fig. 4. For the speech instruction, the model initially predicts the transcription and then responds to the question. The reasoning time is slightly increased, but the model can address complicated tasks with limited training data.

4 Experiments

4.1 Settings

Training The audio encoder is Whisper Large V3 (Radford et al., 2023), and the foundation model is Llama-3.1-8B-Instruct (Dubey et al., 2024). The alignment adapter is a projection where the output size is 4096. We apply LoRA to the Attention module, where rank and α are set to 64 and 16, respectively. Both alignment and shrinking stages consist of 6,000 steps, with the SFT stage set to around 4,000 steps. The sample temperature *T* at Stage II starts at 1 and increases by 5 per training epoch. The experiments are conducted on 32 A800 GPUs for training on 10k hours of data. The training time for the two stages is approximately four days, and the SFT requires an additional day. App. C shows more details about training settings.

Evaluation We evaluate Soundwave on several basic tasks and the open-ended AIR-Bench. We also remove repeated samples (see App. A.4) before training to avoid data leakage. We primarily

Table 5: Performance on foundation tasks, including ASR, speech translation (ST), Speech Emotion Recognition (SER), Vocal Sound Classification (VSC). ST is evaluated by ScareBLEU (Post, 2018). * denotes the zero-shot task.

Task	Dateset	Model	Metric	Performance
		SALMONN (Tang et al., 2023)		2.1 4.9
		SpeechVerse (Das et al., 2024)		2.5 4.7
ASR	ASR Librispeech (Test-clean Test-other	WavLLM (Hu et al., 2024)	WER \downarrow	2.0 4.8
		Qwen2-Audio (Chu et al., 2024)		1.6 3.6
		Soundwave		2.1 5.0
		BLSP (Wang et al., 2023)		14.1
	CoVoST2 En-De	SALMONN (Tang et al., 2023)	BLEU ↑	18.6
	COVOST2 EII-De	Qwen2-Audio (Chu et al., 2024)	BLEU	29.9
ST		Soundwave		30.6
	MuST-C [*] (En-Nl En-It En-Ro En-Es)	Qwen2-Audio (Chu et al., 2024)	BLEU ↑	20.7 19.5 11.8 22.
	Musi-C (EII-MIEII-IIIEII-KOIEII-ES)	Soundwave	DLEU	27.0 22.2 16.9 26.
SER	Meld	Qwen2-Audio (Chu et al., 2024)	ACC ↑	0.553
SER	Iviciu	Soundwave	ACC	0.635
		Pengi (Deshmukh et al., 2023)		0.604
VSC	VocalSound	Qwen2-Audio (Chu et al., 2024)	ACC \uparrow	0.939
		Soundwave		0.905

compare Soundwave with Qwen2-Audio, an advanced model for various audio processing tasks.

4.2 Results

Basic Audio Tasks We show the results on foundational audio tasks in Tab. 5. We find that our model demonstrates a significant advantage on the ST and SER tasks, which heavily rely on the understanding ability of speech LLMs. We also observe that our model shows strong performance on zero-shot tasks, such as translation tasks in other languages. On the other hand, our model still underperforms the SOTA model on the ASR task, indicating that massive training data is essential for ASR. We only used about 244 hours of sound data, which is dozens of times less than the SOTA, thus there is still a gap on the VSC task.

AIR-Bench We compare our model on AIR-Bench across speech foundation, sound foundation, and speech chat tasks. As shown in Tab. 6, our model demonstrates SOTA performance on average speech foundation tasks with only about 10k of training data. Specifically, we outperform the best of previous speech LLMs on six sub-tasks. Since 98.61% of the training data consists of English speech, our model performs worse on the language identification task. This highlights that the proportion of different languages remains important.

Results of the sound foundation task are shown in Tab. 7. Although only around 244 hours of data were used, our model is still superior to other models, except Qwen2-Audio, which is trained with 10k hours. Moreover, our single-encoder architecture performs better than the two-encoder



Figure 5: Training curves of different strategies

model (Tang et al., 2023), indicating that fewer encoders can process both speech and sound simultaneously. Our model also performs well in AIR-Bench speech chat task, ranking second only to Qwen2-Audio among open source models.

5 Analysis

Considering that analysis based on full data requires massive training cost, we analyze our method based on Librispeech data. The experiments are trained on 8 A800 GPUs with 4,000 steps. We use **Adapter** $(\times n)$ to denote that the adapter architecture is the same as Qwen2-Audio, where *n* is the down-sampling rate.

5.1 Convergence Rate

In Fig. 5, we compare the convergence rate with and without the first alignment stage, and the projection adapter architecture. Soundwave sees a high convergence rate, with the loss rapidly decreasing within the first hundred steps. In contrast, the training process of the other model is much slower without the alignment stage. Furthermore, Soundwave performs worse than other models without stage one, because the shrinking adapter relies on the CTC prediction.

Table 6: Performance on the AIR-Bench speech foundation tasks.

Task	Soundwave	Qwen2-Audio	Qwen-Audio Turbo	SALMONN	BLSP	NExT-GPT	PandaGPT	Whisper +GPT-4
Speech Grounding	59.2	28.3	45.4	25.3	25.0	25.4	23.0	35.0
Language Identification	89.6	93.3	95.9	28.1	30.8	23.7	34.6	96.8
Gender Recognition	90.3	79.3	82.5	35.5	33.2	57.0	66.5	21.9
Emotion Recognition	60.5	54.6	60.0	29.9	27.4	25.7	26.0	59.5
Age Prediction	58.9	36.1	58.8	48.7	51.2	62.4	42.5	41.1
Entity Recognition	81.7	82.0	48.1	51.7	37.2	26.1	34.0	69.8
Intent Classification	93.2	85.8	56.4	36.7	46.6	25.6	28.5	87.7
Speaker num. Verification	73.3	48.8	54.3	34.3	28.1	25.4	43.2	30.0
Synthesized Detection	72.5	25.9	69.3	50.0	50.0	30.8	53.1	40.5
Average	75.5	59.3	63.4	37.8	36.6	33.6	39.0	53.6

Table 7: Performance on the AIR-Bench audio foundation and chat tasks.

Task	Soundwave	Qwen2-Audio	Qwen-Audio Turbo	SALMONN	BLSP	NExT-GPT	PandaGPT	Gemini (1.5-pro)
Sound (average) Speech Chat	62.10 6.51	65.10 7.18	60.95 7.04	32.95 6.16	31.43 6.17	32.15 3.86	43.58 3.58	- 6.97
0 20 30 40 50	3.6	86. 86. 90 90 90 25.8 02 	rr (×4)	20 ⁸⁰ 10 5		peech + Sound peech 200 3 Training s	Speech + Uncleane Uncleaned speech Uncleaned speech Uncle	d sound

Figure 6: Comparison of alignment effect and speed.

compression method

5.2 Effect of Alignment

audio and text

We randomly sampled 200 items from the Librispeech test clean set and then extracted text and speech representations. The similarity of speech and text after average pooling is compared, as shown in Fig. 6. We found that the representation of Soundwave with the alignment adapter is significantly higher than that of other methods. In addition, we further compare the average training speed under the same batch conditions. The training speed in the alignment stage is nearly three times faster than that of other methods. Whether due to the alignment effect or the training method, the alignment adapter shows obvious advantages.

5.3 Effect of Shrinking

We compare the performance and compression ratios of different strategies on ASR tasks. We found that our approach compresses significantly based on text length. Our method maintains stable performance with 2.5% compression ratios. However, the compression method leads to performance degrada-

Figure 7: Training curves with cleaned and uncleaned data at the alignment stage.

tion on other test tasks without the aid of auxiliary information. This demonstrates that auxiliary information can compensate for missing features, allowing the LLMs to receive complete information.

We exhibit the inference speed in Tab. 8, using Time To First Token (TTFT) as the metric. Our method shows a speed-up of about 15% and 25% compared to Adapter (\times 3) and Adapter (\times 4) methods, respectively. This demonstrates that our method uses fewer tokens while achieving greater inference speed-up. We found that the shrinking adapter does not incur significant computational cost, proving it is both lightweight and effective.

5.4 Data Quality

The training loss for Stage I, with and without cleaning the speech and sound data, is compared in Fig. 7. When uncleaned speech is used, the training process becomes unstable. Additionally, if the sound data is not properly processed, it significantly worsens the overall training. Given that the alignment stage only trains a few parameters to align the two pretrained large models, the quality

Method	Test clean	Test other	TTFT (ms)	Compression ratio
Shrinking adapter	3.1	6.6	72	2.5%
w/o auxiliary info.	3.1	7.1	72	2.5%
Adapter $(\times 3)$	3.8	6.5	95	33.3%
Adapter ($\times 4$)	4.3	7.8	85	25.0%

Table 8: Comparison of different shrinking methods onthe Librispeech ASR dataset.

of the training data is crucial.

5.5 Data Scaling

We compare the performance from 1k to 10k hours of data, and the results are shown in Fig. 8. Our model, using only 1k hours of data, achieves performance comparable to previous speech LLMs. Note that we use only the ASR task as the SFT data, yet our model demonstrates decent capability in instruction following. This demonstrates that the speech representation is well aligned with the text representation. When we further scale up the training data, all tasks show consistent improvements.

5.6 Knowledge-Based QA

We present a case of using the speech instruction to ask complex questions in Fig. 9. We find that Soundwave inherits the rich knowledge of LLMs during the conversation. For more examples of performance in physics, chemistry, finance, mathematics, and other fields, refer to App. E.

6 Related Work

Speech contains rich non-semantic information compared to text (Wang et al., 2024; Bu et al., 2024; Huang et al., 2024). For LLMs to achieve an accurate understanding of audio, they must have a comprehensive perception of speech rather than relying solely on text (Ji et al., 2024a; Ao et al., 2024). As a result, many researchers have studied how to build end-to-end speech LLMs (Hu et al., 2024; Tang et al., 2023; Chu et al., 2024; Ghosh et al., 2024; Fang et al., 2024; Geng et al., 2025).

Some studies have found the *less is more* phenomenon in LLMs with respect to data usage (Zhou et al., 2024; Song et al., 2025), meaning that efficient use of data can also achieve good performance. However, for speech LLMs, data efficiency has not been fully explored. Therefore, this work addresses this issue by focusing on the key challenge of speech-text alignment.

The acoustic features and text features differ significantly in both their representation space



Figure 8: Comparison of scaling effect in AIR-Bench speech foundation tasks.



Figure 9: A case of answering the spoken question.

and length. To address this issue, Chu et al. (2024, 2023) employ convolution network to downsample the speech, while others opt for solutions with more learnable parameters, such as Q-Former (Tang et al., 2023) and linear layers (Hu et al., 2024). Unlike previous work, the proposed Soundwave implements two adapters to address differences in representation and length, which also make training more efficient.

Speech LLMs are primarily designed for two capabilities: Speech and Sound. Tang et al. (2023); Hu et al. (2024) combine Whisper with other feature extractors, such as BEATs (Chen et al., 2023) and WavLM (Chen et al., 2022), to process sound features. Chu et al. (2024) show that a fully fine-tuned encoder can also capture sound information. Our work demonstrates that a frozen encoder can efficiently process both types of features when provided with the proper data and training strategy.

7 Conclusion

Speech understanding is a core capability for multimodal LLMs, yet current speech LLMs often rely on enormous amounts of training data, putting them out of reach for most academic researchers due to the high costs involved. To address this, we developed a more data-efficient solution: a three-stage training strategy paired with a model architecture that incorporates two adapters. This approach effectively tackles the mismatches in representation and length between speech and text. The trained Soundwave delivers top-tier performance on the AIR-Bench speech tasks, while requiring significantly less training data.

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Limitations

Our work still has some limitations, specifically in the following three aspects:

- We have not verified the feasibility of our approach on larger models with more parameters.
- Due to time and manpower limitations, the amount of sound data we have labeled from the scene dataset is still relatively small. As a result, we are unable to conduct in-depth experiments to determine the optimal amount of sound data to include.
- Due to the lack of relevant data, our model does not perform well in music understanding tasks and has limited support for multiple languages.

Next, we will expand the parameter size of our model to verify the feasibility of our approach on larger models. We will also incorporate music understanding and multilingual data to enhance these capabilities. In addition, we will continue annotating the sound data to further validate the optimal data ratio. We also hope that other researchers in the community will conduct related studies.

Ethical Considerations

Use of Artifacts Our study employs Whisper Large V3 as the audio encoder to extract and process speech input data and utilizes Llama-3.1-8B-Instruct as the foundation model for downstream tasks. In using these models, we adhere to academic standards and have cited their original papers

and relevant documentation to ensure proper scholarly attribution. Additionally, Whisper is released under MIT License, while Llama-3.1-8B-Instruct is subject to Llama 3.1 Community License. We have ensured that our application of the model does not violate any of the specified restrictions, thereby maintaining compliance with the license terms.

Data Collection All the datasets used in our study are publicly released open-source datasets, and we strictly adhere to the corresponding open-source license agreements to ensure the legality and compliance of the data sources. In addition, the supplementary data annotation work we conducted did not involve any data privacy or sensitive information. Detailed procedures and workflow of the data annotation work can be found in Section A.1. The content related to Statistics For Data can be found in Section A.3.

Computational Experiment Design and Execution In Section 4.1, we detail the number of parameters of the base model used, the total computational budget, and the computing infrastructure employed. Tab. 13 in Section C lists the hyperparameters used during training and other related configuration details. In Sections 4.2 and 5, we present the final training results and a comparative analysis of experiments.

Data Annotation and Ethical Compliance In the Section A.1, we provide detailed explanations of the manual data annotation work. Section A.1.1 details our data processing methods. We display the complete instruction text given to participants in Fig. 10, and explain our volunteer recruitment methods, salaries, and annotator characteristics in Section A.1.3 and A.1.4. Throughout the entire data processing procedure, no ethical risks to personal privacy or data security were posed, and therefore no ethics committee review was required.

Use of AI Tools In the course of this research project, AI tools were only utilized in specific aspects, such as assisting with coding and providing grammar checks and language refinement in the writing of the paper, to enhance efficiency and textual quality. Beyond these applications, the core research content, data processing, experimental design, analysis, and conclusions were all independently conducted by the research team, without any other form of artificial intelligence involvement, ensuring the rigor and originality of the study.

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A Data Construction and Preparation

A.1 Sound Re-annotation

Since a scene segment may contain multiple sounds, we allow users to select multiple sound labels. In the end, we labeled 7,863 audio files, totaling 7.30 hours, with 5,197 files being single-label, totaling 4.81 hours. Specific details can be found in the following sections. We will release all of these labeled data.

A.1.1 Data Splitting

We divide the original 10s data into combinations of 3s-3s-4s for annotation.

A.1.2 Data Annotation

In accordance with the pre-existing scene labels, we established detailed sound annotations, such as waves and birdsong for a beach scenario. Subsequently, we recruited a number of volunteers to perform data annotation tasks. The interface utilized for this process is illustrated in Fig. 10.

Annotation

File Name: a001_0_10_0-3.wav

► 0:00 / 0:03 ····· • :
Your Name
idx 275 /1000
Select the options below that you think is correct(multiple choices are allowed), After completion, click 'Save', if None of them correct, click 'None of above match':
🗹 Car Passing Sound
Sound of conversation
Footsteps Sound
Save
None of above match
已选择项:
<pre>▼ [0 : "Car Passing Sound"]</pre>

Figure 10: Page for sound annotation.

A.1.3 Volunteer Sources and Salaries

We extensively recruited volunteers for this project, comprising 70% undergraduate students, 25% graduate students, and 5% individuals who have already graduated. Each participant was compensated with a one-time payment of 200 RMB, which aligns with the prevailing wage levels in mainland China.

A.1.4 Volunteer Authorization

All volunteers have agreed to the public release of their labeled data to promote academic research within the community.

A.2 Data Process

The process from raw data to final application in this paper includes two steps: Data Selection and Data Filtration.

Data Selection We performed data selection on the following dataset:

- **TED-LIUM**, we selected the speaker adaptation part as our dataset, as it is more balanced and representative in characteristics (number of speakers, gender, duration) (Hernandez et al., 2018).
- **GiGaSpeech** It contains five data sizes: XL, L, M, S, and XS. We noticed that the WER limit for XL is relatively loose, so we did not choose this size of data. At the same time, due to the large number of data in L, it would cause GigaSpeech's data to occupy too high a proportion, while the data in S and XS are too small. Therefore, we ultimately chose M.
- Common Voice (En), Common Voice contains multiple versions. Since we mainly use it to construct the data required for Covost2 (Wang et al., 2021), we selected the matching version, which is Common Voice En 15.0. At the same time, we also use it to construct the data required for Age Prediction, which does not have specific version requirements. For convenience, we consistently use Common Voice En 15.0.
- Common Voice (Ja), Common Voice contains multiple versions. Since we are using this data to build a Language Identification task, and in order to balance with data from other languages, we need to select around 15 hours of data. Smaller versions do not provide enough data, and larger versions would result in unnecessary overhead, so we ultimately chose Common Voice ja 7.0.

Data Filtration To ensure data quality, we performed filtering on the dataset:

• **Duration**, it cannot exceed 30 seconds for the Whisper encoder, and it cannot be less than 3 seconds for more balanced training.

- Lenth We excluded transcriptions that were longer than 200 to ensure the stability of the training process. We limit the frame length to no more than 100 times the text length, as exceeding this indicate the speech contains excessive noise.
- WER To ensure stable training, we only retained the data with a WER of less than 10% in the Whisper recognition results.

Instruction Data Generation During the SFT data preparation phase, we used the GPT-4o-mini model to automatically generate question-answer pairs for all the training tasks. For example about the Fisher conversation ASR data, the process involved extracting dialogue segments from the ASR dataset and inputting them into the GPT-4o-mini model, which was instructed to generate contextually relevant questions framed from an objective third-person perspective. For each question, the model also generated corresponding answers directly derived from the conversation. These question-answer pairs were then incorporated into the training dataset for the chat task.

A.3 Data Statistics

We present the usage of audio data and the total amount for each dataset in Table 3. It is important to note that in this statistical process, the same data is counted only once across different stages, only once across different tasks, and only once even if constructed using different methods within the same task. If you are interested in the specific data usage for each stage and task, please refer to the subsequent section.

A.3.1 Alignment Stage Data

In Tab. 9, we present the datasets used during the alignment stage, along with their respective quantities and durations.

Table 9: Summary of datasets, their size, and duration used in the alignment stage.

	<u>с</u> .	
Dataset	Size	Duration (h)
Multilingual LibriSpeech	984,559	4081.61
GigaSpeech	713,394	805.11
TED-LIUM	143,641	244.02
TUT w./ libritts	4,698	18.48
Vocalsound w./ libritts	19,737	82.42
Europral-ASR	718,663	418.42
LibriSpeech	281,241	961.05
TextrolSpeech	170,502	246.85
SUM	3,036,435	6,857.97

As described in Section 3, the sound and scene data used in this stage are both constructed with LibriTTS (Zen et al., 2019) inserted in between. "TUT w./ LibriTTS" refers to the dataset where TUT is sandwiched between LibriTTS, while "TUT w./ LibriTTS" refers to the dataset where Vocal-Sound is sandwiched between LibriTTS.

A.3.2 Shrinking Stage Data

In Tab. 9, we present the datasets used during the shrinking stage, along with their respective quantities and durations.

Table 10: Summary of datasets, their size, and duration in the shrinking stage.

Dataset	Size	Duration (h)
ASR (First Stage)	3,012,000	6757.06
Covost2 (en-de)	232,953	364.89
MUST-C (en-de)	226,810	395.10
Fisher	153,102	1091.42
TUT w./ LibriTTS	4,937	19.33
VocalSound w./ LibriTTS	19,737	82.42
SUM	3,649,539	8,710.23

Here, we have two points that need clarification: 1) Why is the ASR data reduced compared to the first stage? 2) Why has the "TUT w./ LibriTTS" data increased compared to the first stage?

Here, we will explain why the ASR data in this stage is reduced. In this stage, the LoRA parameters of the large model need to be trained. To ensure stable training, it is important to avoid overlap between tasks executed by different instructions. As shown in Figure 1, we have a dedicated task for Sound, which primarily involves predicting special Sound tokens. To prevent overlap, we removed the data containing Sound special tokens from the ASR dataset.

Here, we explain the reason for the increased amount of "TUT w./ LibriTTS" data in this stage. In the previous training phase, we removed data that was deemed to have a high level of noise during manual annotation in order to ensure the stability of the training process. However, in this phase, we included these data to enhance the model's robustness.

A.3.3 SFT Data

Our SFT data statistic details are shown in Tab. 11.

A.4 Mitigating Data Leakage Risks

In this section, we will discuss the risks of data leakage in several parts. For one set of tasks, we used non-homogeneous training data, while for another set, although we employed homogeneous data, we rigorously considered the issue of data leakage.

A.4.1 Non-homogeneous Training Data

Speech Gender Recognition The task involved in the test set is AIR-Bench(Yang et al., 2024), which uses Common Voice(Ardila et al., 2019) and MELD(Poria et al., 2019) to construct the data. We use TextrolSpeech(Ji et al., 2024b) to construct the data, which is considered non-homogeneous data in comparison.

Spoken Language Identification This task involves a total of 7 languages: Chinese, English, Italian, German, French, Spanish, and Japanese. AIR-Bench (Yang et al., 2024) uses Covost2 (Wang et al., 2021) in its construction, which is sourced from Common Voice (Ardila et al., 2019). The construction of data in English, Italian, German, French, and Spanish, we used Europarl-ASR (Garcés Díaz-Munío et al., 2021), while for Chinese data, we used AISHELL3 (Shi et al., 2020). These sources are different from Common Voice, so there is no data leakage. For Japanese data construction, we used Common Voice, which is the same source as AIR-Bench, so we paid special attention to potential leakage issues. We noticed that there were only two Japanese samples in AIR-Bench, so we manually removed these two entries.

A.4.2 Homogeneous Training Data

Speech Grounding Since our training set is constructed using the same dataset as in the AIR-Bench test, we made sure that the test set was not included in the training. We removed data where the same word in the same position was queried in the audio. Specifically, due to the difficulty of ensuring that randomly selected data doesn't overlap during the selection process, we adopted a post-processing approach where we deleted training data with the same filename and identical queries.

Emotion Recognition During the construction of our training dataset, we utilized the Textrol-Speech (Ji et al., 2024b), RAVDESS (Livingstone and Russo, 2018), CREMA-D(Cao et al., 2014), IEMOCAP (Busso et al., 2008), and MELD (Poria et al., 2019) datasets. Notably, TextrolSpeech is composed of multiple datasets, including ESD, MEAD, MESS, SAVEE, and TESS. Given that AIR-Bench incorporates data from IEMOCAP and MELD, we have entirely excluded these datasets

Task	Dataset	Size	Duration (hours)
ASR	LibriSpeech	281241	961.05
Translation EN-DE	Covost2, MuST-C	455648	753.18
Speech Grounding	LibriSpeech	23828	51.36
Spoken Language Identification	Common Voice, Europal-ST	269485	293.15
Speaker Gender Recognition	TextrolSpeech	319986	466.09
Emotion Recognition	TextrolSpeech, RAVDESS, CREMA-D, IEMOCAP	258541	347.18
Speaker Age Prediction	Common Voice	77239	120.04
Speech Entity Recognition	SLURP	114792	91.62
Intent Classification	SLURP	212473	151.52
Speaker Num. Verification	VoxCeleb	156033	435.17
Synthesized Voice Detection	FoR	53696	47.55
Vocal Sound Classification	VocalSound	29962	34.77
Acoustic Scene Classification	TUT2017, CochlScene	159590	443.31
Chat	Fisher	132209	956.25
Speech Instruction	AnyInstruct	106770	206.30
SUM	18	2651493	5358.54

Table 11: Summary of datasets, their size, and duration used in the SFT stage.

from our training data. Additionally, the test set of MELD has also been removed to ensure data integrity and prevent potential data leakage.

Speech Entity Recognition and Intent Classification We used the same source data as AIR-Bench for construction, both utilizing SLURP (Bastianelli et al., 2020), so we paid special attention to data leakage issues. Since AIR-Bench retained the original file names for all its files, we directly removed this portion of the data from our dataset.

Speaker Number Verification We used the same source data as AIR-Bench for construction, both utilizing VoxCeleb (Nagrani et al., 2017), We used a fully random selection method, choosing a series of speech pairs to form our training set. Since the random selection process is hard to control, we removed any data that had already appeared in AIR-Bench after the selection.

Synthesized Voice Detection We used FoR (Reimao and Tzerpos, 2019) to construct our training set. We noticed that FoR overlaps with AIR-Bench. However, AIR-Bench does not provide detailed records of the specific sources of these data, so we removed the repeated test and development sets from FoR.

A.5 Dataset Lisence

The paper and license for the dataset we used are listed in Table 15. There are several points regarding the usage of data that need to be clarified.

Fisher Our access to the Fisher dataset is authorized by the National University of Singapore. We will strictly adhere to the usage agreement and will not, in any way, release, broadcast, disclose, display, copy, reproduce, or redistribute this data to

anyone outside of our team.

B Performance on MMAU benchmark

The following results on MMAU benchmark (Sakshi et al., 2024) in Tab 12. We can found that Soundwave still outperforms Qwen2-Audio in Speech tasks and shows decent performance on Sound tasks.

Table 12: Resutls on MMAU speech and Sound tasks.

Model	Speech Tasks	Sound Tasks	Avg.
Soundwave	46.25	46.25	46.25
Qwen2-Audio	42.04	54.95	48.50
Qwen-Audio	30.03	55.25	42.64
SALAMONN	25.50	41.00	33.25
GAMA	18.91	41.44	30.18

C Training Configurations

The training settings of different stages are shown in Tab. 13. For all training and decoding processes, we set 'You are a helpful language and speech assistant. You are able to understand the speech content that the user provides and assist the user with a variety of tasks using natural language.' as the system prompt.

Table 13: Overview of training parameters at different stages.

Settings	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
Batch	32	16	8
Learning rate	1e-4	3e-5	3e-5
Accumulation steps	8	8	4
Training param.	144M	266M	122M

Model	#Params	#Data (Hours)	AIR-Bench Speech Avg.(%)
Qwen2-Audio	$\sim 8B$	\sim 520K	59.3
Qwen-Audio Turbo	${\sim}8\mathrm{B}$	$\sim 147 \text{K}$	63.4
SALMONN	$\sim 14B$	$\sim 9 K$	37.8
BLSP	$\sim 7 \mathrm{B}$	$\sim 13 \text{K}$	36.6
NExT-GPT	$\sim 12B$	-	33.6
PandaGPT	$\sim \! 14B$	-	39.0
Soundwave	$\sim 9B$	$\sim 10 \mathrm{K}$	75.5

Table 14: Comparison of training parameters and data for different models.

All in all, we trained a total of 266M parameters in our three-stage process. To better highlight the advantages of our model's parameters compared to others, we plotted the relationship between AIR-Bench performance and training parameters, which is shown in Fig. 11. We also compare the size of model parameters and training data in Tab. 14.



Figure 11: AIR-Bench speech accuracy with number of training parameters.

D AIR-Bench Sound and Music Foundation Tasks

The AIR-Bench sound and music tasks evaluate models on various auditory capabilities. Sound tasks focus on identifying, classifying, and reasoning with environmental sounds, while music tasks involve classifying musical elements, analyzing pitch and velocity, and understanding emotional content. As Tab. 16 shown, Soundwave demonstrates exceptional performance in vocal sound and acoustic scene classification, achieving impressive accuracy. Though few sound data is used, sound average score of Soundwave still ranks second. This highlights its strong performance across soundrelated tasks, even with limited data.

E Speech Instruction

We demonstrate our model's ability to follow voice commands from two aspects: generation tasks and knowledge question-answering tasks.

E.1 Generation Tasks

We selected some commonly used generation tasks in daily life, which demonstrate our model's ability to assist in handling everyday affairs. Our presentation results are shown in Figures 12, 13, and 14.

E.2 Knowledge-based QA Tasks

We will categorize the knowledge to showcase our model's QA ability across various domains of knowledge. Specifically, for math, please refer to Fig. 15. For physics, please refer to Fig. 16. For biology, please refer to Fig. 17. For history, please refer to Fig. 18.

DataSet Name	Citation	License	
Librispeech w./ timestamp	Olympusmons (2021)	Apache 2.0	
Librispeech	Panayotov et al. (2015)	CC BY 4.0	
CREMA-D	Cao et al. (2014)	DbCL-1.0	
TED-LIUM	Hernandez et al. (2018)	CC BY-NC-ND 3.0	
MLS	Pratap et al. (2020)	CC BY 4.0	
Europarl-ASR	Garcés Díaz-Munío et al. (2021)	CC BY 4.0	
TextrolSpeech	Ji et al. (2024b)	MIT License	
LibriTTS	Zen et al. (2019)	CC BY 4.0	
VCTK	Yamagishi et al. (2019)	ODC-By 1.0	
TUT2017	Duppada and Hiray (2017)	Non-Commercial	
VocalSound	Gong et al. (2022)	CC BY-SA 4.0	
MUST-C	Cattoni et al. (2021)	CC BY-NC-ND 4.0	
Europarl-ST	Iranzo-Sánchez et al. (2020)	CC BY-NC 4.0	
Common Voice	Ardila et al. (2019)	CC0 1.0 Universal	
CochlScene	Jeong and Park (2022)	CC BY-SA	
SLURP	Bastianelli et al. (2020)	CC BY-NC 4.0	
RAVDESS	Livingstone and Russo (2018)	CC BY-NC-SA 4.0	
IEMOCAP	Busso et al. (2008)	IEMOCAP License	
MELD	Poria et al. (2019)	GPL-3.0	
Gigaspeech	Chen et al. (2021)	Apache 2.0	
Covost2	Wang et al. (2021)	CC0 1.0 Universal	
VoxCeleb	Nagrani et al. (2017)	CC BY 4.0	
WaveFake	Frank and Schönherr (2021)	MIT License	
FoR	Reimao and Tzerpos (2019)	LGPL-3.0	
AnyInstruct	Zhan et al. (2024)		
Fisher	Cieri et al. (2004)	LDC License	

Table 15: The summary for the dataset

Table 16: Performance on the AIR-Bench sound and music foundation tasks.

Task	Soundwave	Qwen2-Audio	Qwen-Audio Turbo	SALMONN	BLSP	NExT-GPT	PandaGPT
Audio Grounding	23.1	34.9	41.6	24.0	34.6	62.2	38.3
Vocal Sound Classification	91.7	89.3	78.1	45.3	29.8	23.5	31.6
Acoustic Scene Classification	83.8	67.4	61.3	34.1	25.2	24.1	55.7
Sound Question Answering	49.7	68.8	62.8	28.4	36.1	18.8	48.7
Sound avg.	62.1	65.1	61.0	33.0	31.4	32.2	43.6
Music Instruments Classification	37.1	65.8	59.6	41.3	22.8	24.3	47.7
Music Genre Classification	49.5	78.8	77.1	45.3	26.1	28.1	39.8
Music Note Analysis-Pitch	27.7	28.7	30.1	26.4	23.5	25.1	26.4
Music Note Analysis-Velocity	23.2	26.2	25.1	22.8	24.9	23.1	27.2
Music Question Answering	65.0	65.7	62.5	54.6	31.0	47.1	50.7
Music Emotion Detection	38.3	46.9	39.0	32.2	28.3	25.4	36.7
Music avg.	40.1	52.0	48.9	37.1	26.1	28.9	38.1

Task	Soundwave	Qwen2-Audio	Qwen-Audio Turbo	SALMONN	BLSP	NExT-GPT	PandaGPT	Whisper +GPT-4
Speech	6.41	7.18	7.04	6.16	6.17	3.86	3.58	7.54
Sound	5.33	6.99	6.59	6.28	5.55	4.76	5.46	/
Music	5.10	6.79	5.98	5.95	5.08	4.18	5.06	/
Mixed Audio	4.98	6.77	5.77	6.08	4.52	2.92	2.93	/
Average	5.46	6.93	6.34	6.11	5.33	4.13	4.25	/



Figure 12: Generate task show case 1.



Figure 13: Generate task show case 2.



Figure 14: Generate task show case 3.



Figure 15: Knowledge-based QA about math.



Figure 16: Knowledge-based QA about physics.







