Beyond Full Fine-tuning: Harnessing the Power of LoRA for Multi-Task Instruction Tuning

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Abstract

Low-Rank Adaptation (LoRA) is a widespread parameter-efficient fine-tuning algorithm for large-scale language models. It has been commonly accepted that LoRA mostly achieves promising results in single-task, low-resource settings, and struggles to handle multi-task instruction tuning scenarios. In this paper, we conduct a systematic study of LoRA on diverse tasks and rich resources with different learning capacities, examining its performance on seen tasks during training and its cross-task generalization on unseen tasks. Our findings challenge the prevalent assumption that the limited learning capacity will inevitably result in performance decline. In fact, our study reveals that when configured with an appropriate rank, LoRA can achieve remarkable performance in high-resource and multi-task scenarios, even comparable to that achieved through full fine-tuning. It turns out that the constrained learning capacity encourages LoRA to prioritize conforming to instruction requirements rather than memorizing specialized features of particular tasks or instances. This study reveals the underlying connection between learning capacity and generalization capabilities for robust parameter-efficient fine-tuning, highlighting a promising direction for the broader application of LoRA across various tasks and settings.

Keywords: Natural Language Generation, Low-Rank Adaptation, Instruction Tuning

1. Introduction

Instruction tuning aims to fine-tune language models on a collection of tasks described via instructions (Wei et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022; Iyer et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2023; Longpre et al., 2023), which aligns the large-scale language models (LLMs) with human-like responses for the given instruction. Due to the extensive computational resources required to fully fine-tune LLMs, many studies have adopted Low-Rank Adaptation (LoRA, Hu et al. (2022)) methods for instruction tuning (Xu et al., 2023; Cui et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2023). Specifically, LoRA introduces trainable rank decomposition matrices into each layer of the Transformer, and freezes the pre-trained model weights, which significantly reducing the number of trainable parameters for downstream tasks.

Due to the reduction of learnable parameters, one common assumption is that the limited learning capacity will lead to performance decline (Ding et al., 2023; Mundra et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2023; Sun et al., 2023). Consequently, LoRA is primarily considered effective when data resources are limited and tuning tasks are constrained (Chen et al., 2022; Pu et al., 2023; Fu et al., 2023). However, the performance of LoRA with large learning capacities in scenarios with diverse tasks and abundant resources remains unexplored.

In this paper, we aim to bridge this research gap by conducting a systematic investigation of LoRA in instruction tuning scenarios. We evaluate the performance of LoRA across diverse tasks and rich resources with different learning capacities achieved by adjusting the number of trainable parameters. Specifically, we vary the trainable parameters of LoRA by altering its intrinsic ranks, and control task diversity by changing the number of learning tasks. The effectiveness is evaluated for both intra-task performance on learned tasks and inter-task performance on unseen tasks. The experimental results reveal the following findings:

- LoRA can achieve remarkable performance in high-resource, multi-task settings. As demonstrated in Figure 1, when configured with an appropriate rank, LoRA can achieve performance comparable to or even surpass those of full fine-tuning. This finding challenges the previous assumption that LoRA is primarily suited for low-resource and constrained task scenarios, broadening the applicability of LoRA.
- Besides parameter-efficiency, LoRA may further bring the benefit of implicit regularization.
 We observe that LoRA consistently exhibits improved performance as its learning capacity increases. Even with a high learning capac-

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Figure 1: Scaling trends of intra-task (left) and inter-task (right) generalization capabilities of LLaMA-7B as a function of learning capacity across varying task diversity. Models fine-tuned using LoRA are represented by solid lines, while fully tuned models are denoted by dashed horizontal lines. Models are tuned on 100, 250, 500, and 756 tasks from NIv2 dataset (Wang et al., 2022), respectively.

ity (rank $\geq 2^{10}$), LoRA maintains robust crosstask generalization performance compared to full fine-tuning. We assume that there exists implicit regularization within LoRA, which reduces overfitting to seen tasks and improves the generalization ability on unseen tasks.

· Only when LoRA attains sufficient learning capacity can it effectively grasp the semantics of the task instructions. As shown in Figure 1, when the learning capacity is limited, in contrast to the noticeable improvement in the tasksolving capability for seen tasks, increasing the intrinsic rank of LoRA does not significantly enhance performance on unseen tasks. We observe that the constrained learning capacity prompts LoRA to prioritize adhering to the output form specified in the instruction, but LoRA may struggle to accurately solve the task. Therefore, only when the learning capacity is sufficiently large can LoRA effectively understand the semantics of instructions, thereby enhancing the performance on unseen tasks.

In summary, our findings challenge the common assumption that limited learning capacity will result in a decline in performance. We discover that LoRA can achieve both promising intra- and inter-task generalization performance. It appears that with limited learning capacity, LoRA tends to prioritize generating outputs that align with the instruction requirements but may lack accuracy. This study enhances our understandings of the application scope and influence factors of LoRA, therefore raising the opportunity to employ LoRA across a wider range of tasks and settings.

2. Background

2.1. Instruction Tuning

Instruction Tuning Problem. Instruction tuning aims to align LLMs with human-like natural lan-

guage instructions. As illustrated in Figure 2, an instruction dataset can be formally defined as $\mathcal{D} = \{(I^{(t)}, x_i^{(t)}, y_i^{(t)}), t \in T\}$, where t represents a specific task within the task set T, $I^{(t)}$ denotes the natural language instruction for task t, $x_i^{(t)}$ represents the input, and $y_i^{(t)}$ represents the target associated with input $x_i^{(t)}$ under task t. The primary objective of instruction tuning is to enable a LLM \mathcal{M} to generate the appropriate response given $(I^{(t)}, x_i^{(t)})$, as depicted in the right part of Figure 2.

Instruction Tuning with LoRA. To achieve comparable performance to full-parameter fine-tuning while significantly reducing the computational requirements, one notable representative method is LoRA(Hu et al., 2022). Inspired by Aghajanyan et al. (2021), LoRA hypothesizes that the updates to the weights have a low "intrinsic rank" during adaptation. Parameter update for a pre-trained weight matrix $W_0 \in \mathbb{R}^{d \times k}$ in LoRA is decomposed into a product of two low-rank matrices:

$$h = W_0 x + \Delta W x = W_0 x + BAx$$

where $B \in \mathbb{R}^{d \times r}$, $A \in \mathbb{R}^{r \times k}$, and the rank $r \ll min(d,k)$. During training, W_0 is frozen and does not receive gradient updates, while A and B contain trainable parameters. A is initialized using a random Gaussian initialization technique, whereas matrix B is initialized as a zero matrix, so the initial value of $\Delta W = BA$ is zero at the beginning of training. It's worth noting that ΔWx is scaled by α/r , and a higher α value assigns more weight to the LoRA activations.

2.2. Experimental Settings

Dataset. We adopt the English portion of the SUPER-NATURALINSTRUCTION (NIv2) dataset (Wang et al., 2022) as our benchmark, which contains 757 training tasks and 119 unseen test tasks covering a diverse range of task types. The default instruction schema of NIv2 is composed of



Figure 2: Overview of instruction tuning and model generalization. Instruction tuning aligns large language models with human-like natural language instructions across various tasks. After instruction tuning, the model is expected to adapt to various scenarios across different domains. In this study, we consider the model's ability to perform tasks included in the training stage as intra-task generalization, while its capability to handle tasks not encountered during training is considered as inter-task generalization.

the following components: task definition, positive examples and negative examples. In our experiments, we adopt task definitions alone as the task instructions, without any demonstration examples. Tuning on Varying Training Task. To evaluate the performance of LoRA with varying learning capacities across different levels of task diversity, we construct the training set T_{train} , which consists of four datasets T_{100} , T_{250} , T_{500} and T_{all} . Specifically, we sample 100/250/500/all tasks from the official training tasks in NIv2 and then select 100 examples from each of these tasks. Task sampling is conducted in proportion to the distribution of task categories within the NIv2 dataset. It's worth noting that the four training datasets are inclusive, meaning that each dataset contains all the training data from the preceding dataset. For instance, T_{250} includes all the training data present in T_{100} , and so forth. To ensure the robustness and reliability of our findings, we perform three rounds of sampling, resulting in three distinct training sets T_{train} .

Evaluation on Intra- and Inter-tasks. In our experimental setup, the evaluation task set is further divided into two distinct subsets: T_{seen} and T_{unseen} . The former, T_{seen} , includes the tasks that have been encountered during the instruction tuning stage, and is used to evaluate the intra-task performance of the instruction-tuned model \mathcal{M}' . Formally, the intra-task test set can be denoted as $\mathcal{D}_{\text{test-seen}} =$ $\{(I^{(t)}, x_i^{(t)}, y_i^{(t)}), t \in T_{\text{seen}}\}$. It evaluates the memorization capabilities of \mathcal{M}' , measuring how effectively the model performs on the seen tasks during training. Conversely, T_{unseen} includes the tasks that were not encountered during training, serving to measure the cross-task generalization performance of \mathcal{M}' . The inter-task test set can be denoted as $\mathcal{D}_{\text{test-unseen}} = \{ (I^{(t)}, x_i^{(t)}, y_i^{(t)}), t \in T_{\text{unseen}} \}.$ It measures the ability of \mathcal{M}' to generalize across different unseen tasks. Specifically, we utilize the official test split of NIv2, which consists of 119 unseen test tasks, and select 100 balanced test samples for each task to construct the inter-task test set. To construct the intra-task test set, each task within T_{100} contributes 100 examples, resulting in a total of 10,000 examples. It is ensured that all examples used for testing do not overlap with the corresponding training set.

2.3. Details about Model Fine-tuning

Considering the remarkable performance of LLaMA (Touvron et al., 2023a) on various English benchmarks and the widespread application of its LoRA version (Wu et al., 2023; Cui et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023), we utilize the LLaMA-7B to conduct our experiments. Specifically, we adopt the LoRA fine-tuning code on LLaMA, which is publicly available¹. We update four weight matrices (W_q , W_v , W_k , and W_o) within the self-attention module, with varying ranks from 4 to 4096. The value of α is set to twice the rank, and the dropout rate is consistently maintained at 0.05.

During instruction tuning process, we fine-tune LLaMA for 6 epochs, employing a learning rate of 5e-5 with a linear schedule for LoRA, and a learning rate of 3e-5 with a cosine schedule for full fine-tuning. In both cases, we choose AdamW (Kingma and Ba, 2015) as the optimizer, and set the training batch size to 128. For evaluation, following Wang et al. (2022), we employ both Exact Match accuracy and Rouge-L scores (Lin, 2004) to assess the performance. We report average scores across three

¹https://github.com/tloen/alpaca-lora

			T_{100}		T_{250}		$ T_{500}$		$ $ T_{all}	
	Rank	Trainable	EM	R-L	EM	R-L	EM	R-L	EM	R-L
LoRA	4	0.062%	29.86	43.59	30.97	45.43	32.70	47.45	32.56	47.63
	8	0.124%	31.28	45.84	33.91	49.07	35.01	50.41	35.11	50.71
	16	0.248%	34.37	49.75	35.93	51.53	37.13	52.86	37.46	53.77
	32	0.496%	37.81	53.49	38.30	54.66	39.21	55.39	40.99	57.32
	64	0.986%	39.05	54.87	40.35	56.42	41.72	57.83	43.42	59.14
LoRA	128	1.953%	40.94	56.60	42.48	58.33	44.23	60.07	45.73	61.21
	256	3.831%	43.70	59.29	45.17	60.62	47.51	62.80	48.44	63.60
	512	7.379%	45.80	61.19	47.76	62.81	48.82	63.75	49.92	64.52
	1024	13.745%	47.75	62.79	49.04	63.59	50.46	64.94	51.60	65.42
	2048	24.167%	49.46	64.01	50.40	64.73	51.78	65.70	52.66	66.26
	4096	38.927%	50.55	64.74	51.28	65.50	52.91	66.60	53.36	66.87
Full Fine-tuning			51.57	64.70	52.10	65.02	52.78	65.68	53.77	66.22

Table 1: Exact match (EM) and Rouge-L (R-L) scores on the intra-task test set of LoRA with varying ranks and Full Fine-tuning. The intra-task test set consists of examples from tasks included in T_{100} but not overlapping with the corresponding training set. All reported results represent the average performance across three distinct training sets.

			T_{100}		T_{250}		$ T_{500}$		T_{all}	
	Rank	Trainable	EM	R-L	EM	R-L	EM	R-L	EM	R-L
LoRA	4	0.062%	23.75	39.25	24.98	40.07	25.32	41.14	25.96	42.22
	8	0.124%	23.95	39.16	25.14	40.44	24.99	41.13	25.98	42.63
	16	0.248%	23.77	39.84	25.07	40.85	26.30	42.51	25.69	42.46
	32	0.496%	23.48	39.86	25.30	41.48	25.96	42.45	26.25	43.07
	64	0.986%	24.41	40.33	24.85	41.19	26.52	43.28	26.69	43.37
LoRA	128	1.953%	24.65	41.33	26.15	42.68	26.58	43.48	27.48	44.41
	256	3.831%	24.82	41.50	26.22	42.78	27.95	44.70	28.06	44.75
	512	7.379%	25.40	42.09	26.27	43.20	28.04	45.15	28.79	45.53
	1024	13.745%	25.73	42.55	27.22	44.19	28.45	45.66	29.74	46.96
	2048	24.167%	25.58	42.45	27.94	44.57	29.20	46.22	30.66	47.87
	4096	38.927%	26.38	42.64	27.76	44.14	30.05	46.97	31.12	48.36
Full Fine-tuning			23.77	37.77	26.74	42.21	28.85	45.12	30.58	46.71

Table 2: Exact match (EM) and Rouge-L (R-L) scores on the inter-task test set of LoRA with varying ranks and Full Fine-tuning. The inter-task test set comprises 119 unseen test tasks drawn from the official test split of NIv2. All results reported are the average performance across three distinct training sets.

samplings training sets to ensure the robustness and reliability of our results. All experiments are conducted on NVIDIA A100-80GB GPUs.

3. LoRA for Instruction Tuning

In this section, we systematically investigate the relationship between the learning capacity and generalization performance of LLMs. To achieve this, we vary the trainable parameters within LoRA and adjust the number of learning tasks during the instruction tuning process. Then we evaluate both intra-task performance on learned tasks and intertask performance on unseen tasks of instructiontuned models. Table 1 and Table 2 present the Exact match (EM) and Rouge-L (R-L) scores on the intra-task test set and inter-task test set, respectively. Furthermore, we analyze the differences in output patterns between LoRA and full fine-tuning on general tasks. Outputs of LoRA and fully finetuned models on representative tasks are shown in Figure 3. Exact match scores and the percentage of out-of-options (OOP) outputs on classification tasks within the inter-task test set are illustrated in Figure 4.

3.1. LoRA can Beat Full Fine-tuning

Finding 1: LoRA can achieve remarkable intra-task and inter-task generalization performance in highresource, multi-task settings with an appropriate



Figure 3: Case studies for instruction models trained on T_{all} using Full Fine-tuning and LoRA. Descriptions of the task output form are <u>underscored</u>, and the specific output type is denoted in *italics*. The model's incorrect answers are highlighted in red, while the correct part of the output is in blue.

rank.

Previous research in instruction tuning typically constrained the rank of LoRA within the range of 8 to 64 (Zhang et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2023; Cui et al., 2023). Meanwhile, one common perspective is that LoRA is primarily effective for low-resource and constrained task scenarios (Chen et al., 2022; Pu et al., 2023; Fu et al., 2023). However, our experimental results deviate from this viewpoint. Surprisingly, we observe that even when fine-tuned on NIv2 that consists of over 75,000 examples across 756 tasks, LoRA with an appropriate rank, such as 2048 and 4096, exhibits remarkable intra-task and inter-task generalization performance. This observation challenges the previous opinion that the effectiveness of LoRA is primarily limited to low-resource and limited tasks scenarios, thereby expanding the applicability of LoRA.

Finding 2: LoRA can achieve performance comparable to or even surpass those of full fine-tuning.

Due to the reduction in the number of learnable parameters, one common assumption is that the constrained learning capacity could lead to a decline in performance (Ding et al., 2023; Mundra et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2023). In line with these studies, we observe that when configured with learnable parameters less than 1%, the intra-task generalization performance of LoRA exhibits a decline of near 10 points compared to full fine-tuning. This performance limitation can be attributed to the restricted learning capacity of LoRA, which hinders its ability to effectively recognize and grasp task-specific features.

However, our experimental results also demonstrate that LoRA can achieve comparable or even superior intra-task and inter-task generalization performance compared to full fine-tuning. As shown in Table 1, the generalization capability of LoRA continues to improve with an increase in its learning capacity. Ultimately, when configured with a rank of 4096, LoRA achieves intra-task generalization performance comparable to that of full fine-tuning. Similarly, when evaluating the inter-task generalization ability, LoRA with a rank of 2048 surpasses full fine-tuning across different levels of task diversity, demonstrating improved Exact Match and Rouge-L scores. It's worth noting that while increasing the rank of LoRA results in a higher computational demand, it is still far less than that required for full fine-tuning. For example, when the rank of LoRA is set to 2048, the model can still be fine-tuned on a single A100-80GB GPU. Therefore, how to select the optimal rank based on task complexity and available resources deserves further investigation.

Moreover, we observe that, for some challenging unseen tasks, LoRA with an appropriate rank exhibits relatively better instruction understanding capabilities compared to full fine-tuning. For instance, as shown in Figure 3 for the Data to Text task, models are expected to generate complete sentences that incorporate all the provided input information. In practice, fully tuned models often duplicate the provided input as their output. However, LoRA with a rank of 2048 makes efforts to construct sentences based on the provided information, resulting in fluent sentences that include expected keywords such as "xname", "average" and "Chinese".

3.2. LoRA is not only Parameter-Efficient

Finding 1: LoRA shows strong robustness in terms of generalization ability. As the learning capacity of the model grows, the generalization performance of LoRA is consistently blessed with an enhancement.

As presented in Table 1, when evaluated on the intra-task test set, LoRA consistently exhibits im-

proved performance as the learning capacity increases. Similarly, Table 2 demonstrates that increasing the number of trainable parameters within LoRA consistently enhances its inter-task generalization capability. Ultimately, with a rank of 4096, LoRA outperforms full fine-tuning on both learned tasks and unseen tasks.

Additionally, we observe that the enhanced learning capacity of LoRA usually leads to improved task-solving capabilities across diverse domains. In particular, in classification tasks with multiple options, LoRA with a relatively low rank tends to output the same option regardless of the input. However, when equipped with sufficient learning capacity, as shown in Figure 4, LoRA learns to generate more balanced outputs to improve the accuracy on classification tasks. Moreover, for some challenging generation tasks such as Data to Text in Figure 3, LoRA with limited learning capacity often produce nothing or fragmented sentences. As the intrinsic rank increases, LoRA exhibits enhanced tasksolving capabilities to generate fluent sentences covering more provided information.

Finding 2: LoRA exhibits an implicit regularization effect.

Fully fine-tuned models excels at solving tasks encountered during training, but their performance on unseen tasks, especially those significantly differing from training tasks, is suboptimal. In contrast, as we increase the rank of LoRA, we observe that there is no significant decline in generalization performance across different levels of task diversity. With the increase in learning capacity, LoRA demonstrates effective problem-solving abilities for both seen and unseen tasks. Notably, the generalization performance of LoRA with learnable parameters exceeding 20% remains robust against overfitting, even when the number of learning tasks is relatively limited.

We observe that when dealing with unseen tasks that markedly differ from those encountered during training, fully tuned models may generate inaccurate responses due to a lack of understanding of task instructions. In contrast, models fine-tuned using LoRA demonstrate relatively stronger instruction understanding capabilities and exhibit better generalization performance for such unseen tasks. An illustrative example is the Word Analogy task shown in Figure 3, where fully tuned models struggle to comprehend the instruction to produce words based on the provided set of phrases. Instead, they generate outputs like "A" or "B", or directly copy a word from the input. Conversely, LoRA demonstrates an ability to grasp the task instruction and attempts to generate appropriate words.

These observations imply the implicit regularization within LoRA, which reduces overfitting to the seen tasks and improves the generalization ability



Figure 4: Exact Match (EM) scores and the percentage of out-of-options (OOP) outputs from LoRA with varying ranks and Full Fine-tuning on representative classification tasks within the inter-task test set. Models are fine-tuned on T_{all} and all results reported are the average performance across three distinct training sets.

on unseen tasks. We hypothesize that the constrained learning capacity in LoRA might prompt it to prioritize capturing task-independent patterns and representations. Consequently, this may equip LoRA with enhanced instruction understanding and following capabilities, enabling it to generalize more effectively across diverse tasks.

3.3. Balancing Form and Semantic Accuracy in LoRA

Finding 1: Learning to conform to the task output format and learning to accurately solve the task are two tasks with different levels of complexity.

Even when configured with fewer than 1% of the learnable parameters, LoRA exhibits cross-task generalization performance comparable to full finetuning. We observe that this is largely attributed to the fact that fully fine-tuned models sometimes generate responses that are semantically correct but deviate from the prescribed format. In contrast, models fine-tuned using LoRA tend to generate outputs that align with the instruction requirements but may lack accuracy. This observation suggests that learning to conform to the task output format and learning to accurately solve the task are two tasks with different levels of complexity. The high scores on unseen tasks achieved by LoRA may be largely attributed to the high formal accuracy of its outputs, and this does not necessarily indicate that LoRA has acquired the ability to effectively address the task. This trend is observable in Figure 4, where the percentage of out-of-options outputs from LoRA is significantly lower than that of full fine-tuning on most classification tasks within the inter-task test set. However, the tendency of full fine-tuning models to produce more out-of-option outputs cannot be taken as an indication of overfitting. As illustrated in Figure 4, there is still a noticeable performance gap between the Exact Match scores achieved by full fine-tuning and LoRA with limited learning capacity. This suggests that LoRA prioritizes adhering to the output form required by the instruction, but may struggle to solve the task accurately due to limited learning capacity.

An illustrative example is the Dialogue Act Recognition task shown in Figure 3. When the instruction requires the model to output "Response 1" or "Response 2" to select an appropriate response, fully tuned models often output "yes/no" or simply "1/2", indicating a tendency to provide answers that are not among the given options. Unlike full fine-tuning, LoRA even with a rank of 16 learns to follow the instruction to generate responses between "Response 1" and "Response 2". However, LoRA may often produce incorrect options due to its constrained learning capacity.

Finding 2: Only when LoRA attains sufficient learning capacity can it effectively grasp the semantics of the task instructions.

When the learning capacity is limited, in contrast to the noticeable improvement in the task-solving capability for seen tasks, increasing the intrinsic rank of LoRA does not significantly enhance performance on unseen tasks. We assume the primary reason for this phenomenon is that the constrained learning capacity causes LoRA to prioritize adhering to the output form required in the instruction, but it may struggle to accurately solve the task. Therefore, only when LoRA attains sufficient learning capacity can it effectively understand the semantics of the instructions, thereby enhancing the performance on unseen tasks.

This tendency is particularly evident in classification tasks, where LoRA can effectively follow the instructions to generate outputs from the provided options in most scenarios. However, when configured with constrained learning capacity, LoRA tends to produce the same option for different inputs within the same task. As shown in Figure 4, it's only when the learning capacity is sufficiently large that LoRA can effectively understand the semantics of instructions and options, achieving both formal



Figure 5: Exact Match and Rouge-L scores of LoRA and Full Fine-tuning on the intra-task test set (upper) and inter-task test set (lower). Models are fine-tuned with a consistent learning data size of 25,000 while varying task diversity.

accuracy and semantic correctness. Therefore, in Textual Entailment and Cause-Effect Classification tasks, the performance improvements of LoRA with increasing rank are not notable until the rank exceeds 128. Similarly, this trend continues until a rank of 512 in Dialogue Act Recognition.

These observations underscore the critical role of learning capacity settings in model training and compression, implying that large models may adopt different paradigms to solve problems at different learning capacities.

3.4. Task Scaling

To further investigate the effect of LoRA and full fine-tuning on different levels of task diversity, this section maintains a constant data size while scaling tasks, and subsequently measures their generalization performance.

Specifically, we design control experiments based on the previous experimental settings. To maintain a constant training data size while varying task diversity, we randomly sample 250 examples from each task in T_{100} and 50 examples from each task in T_{500} with replacement, resulting in training datasets T_{100}^* and T_{500}^* that contain a total of 25,000 instances. Similarly, these training data do not include any test data, and we conduct three samplings to ensure the reliability of the experiments. Figure 5 presents the intra-task and inter-task generalization performance for both full fine-tuning and LoRA, where we consider two representative rank settings: 16 and 2048. All reported results rep-

resent the average performance across the three sampled training sets.

By analyzing the intra-task and inter-task generalization performance of both LoRA and full finetuning, we find that:

Finding 1: The learning capacity can significantly impact the memorization capabilities of LLMs.

When the dataset size remains consistent while the number of learning tasks increases, having a sufficient learning capacity becomes essential for achieving effective performance on seen tasks. This is evident from the results presented in the upper part of Figure 5, which consistently demonstrate an improvement in intra-task generalization capability with increasing number of learnable parameters. Furthermore, as the complexity of learning objectives escalates, there is a consistent decline in the intra-task performance of models with the same learning capacity. In particular, as the number of learning tasks scales from 100 to 500, there is a noticeable reduction in generalization performance for both LoRA and full fine-tuning on seen tasks. This phenomenon can be attributed to the reduction in available examples for learning each specific task as the number of training tasks grows. Consequently, models with limited learning capacity face challenges in effectively capturing task-specific features and patterns, which subsequently impacts its intra-task generalization ability.

Finding 2: The relationship between learning capacity and task diversity has intricate effects on the generalization performance of LLMs.

From the bottom part of Figure 5, We observe that larger learning capacity doesn't necessarily lead to stronger generalization performance, which differs from the commonly held belief. Specifically, the inter-task generalization performance of full finetuning lags behind that of LoRA with a rank of 2048, which only possesses 24% of the learnable parameters of full fine-tuning. This phenomenon also highlights the significance of incorporating appropriate regularization techniques during the fine-tuning process to enhance the cross-task generalization capability of LLMs. Additionally, determining the optimal learning capacity represents a valuable direction for future research.

4. Related Work

4.1. Instruction Tuning

In recent years, large language models have demonstrated remarkable capabilities in zero-shot (Wei et al., 2022; Sanh et al., 2022; Kojima et al., 2022) and few-shot learning (Brown et al., 2020; Mishra et al., 2021; Ye et al., 2021). To help the model better understand user intentions and follow instructions more accurately, various efficient instruction tuning strategies have been proposed (Wei et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022; Iyer et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2023; Longpre et al., 2023; Touvron et al., 2023b).

Among them, extensive research has shown that scaling the number of learning tasks can significantly enhance the generalization ability of large language models. Specifically, Wei et al. (2022) reveal that the performance of LLMs on unseen tasks improves with the increasing number of instruction tuning task clusters, and that the benefits emerge only with sufficient model scale. Similarly, Sanh et al. (2022) have demonstrated that multi-task prompted training can enable strong zero-shot generalization abilities in language models and scaling the number of training tasks and the number of prompts per task helps boost the zero-shot task generalization performance. Chung et al. (2022) examine the effect of scaling and show that the model performance substantially improved with both a larger model size and more fine-tuning tasks.

4.2. Low-Rank Adaptation

Recently, due to the extensive computational resources required to fully fine-tune LLMs, researchers have focused on developing parameterefficient techniques that strike a balance between computational resources and performance (Houlsby et al., 2019; Lester et al., 2021; Li and Liang, 2021; Ben Zaken et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023). Among them, one notable representative method is LoRA (Hu et al., 2022), which proposes to decompose the original weight matrix updates into a product of two low-rank matrices.

However, recent works focused on LoRA typically conduct experiments using ranks within the range of 8 to 64. Among them, some works indicate that LoRA generally achieves promising performances in single-task, low-resource settings. For example, Chen et al. (2022) highlight that LoRA tends to outperform full fine-tuning solely on low-resource tasks. Pu et al. (2023) reveal that LoRA outperforms full fine-tuning in low to medium-resource scenarios, while the effectiveness of full fine-tuning tends to improve with increased data availability. Moreover, certain studies indicate that LoRA struggles to achieve comparative performance to full fine-tuning in multi-task instruction tuning scenarios. Zhang et al. (2023) utilize LoRA with a rank of 16 to fine-tune LLaMA through scenario-specific multi-task instruction tuning, uncovering that full fine-tuning achieves superior performance compared to LoRA. Sun et al. (2023) fine-tune LLaMA on Chinese instruction data and show that the performance of LoRA with a rank of 8 lags significantly behind full fine-tuning by approximately 10 points. Wu et al. (2023) show a performance gap of over 10 points between full fine-tuning and LoRA with

a rank of 8 when fine-tuning LLaMA on medical papers.

To the best of our knowledge, the exploration of the relationship between trainable parameters, task diversity, and multi-task learning capabilities for LoRA remains limited. To bridge this research gap, we conduct a comprehensive analysis to explore the intricate connection between the learning capacity of LoRA and its generalization performance on both seen and unseen tasks.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we conduct a systematic study to examine the intra-task and inter-task generalization capabilities exhibited by LoRA across various ranks and full fine-tuning. Our findings challenge common assumptions that the limited learning capacity will result in performance decline. Specifically, LoRA can achieve remarkable intra-task and inter-task performances in high-resource and multitask scenarios, even comparable to that of full finetuning. We observe that the limitation in learning capacity prompts LoRA to prioritize conforming to the instruction requirements instead of memorizing the specialized features of particular tasks or instances. These observations point to implicit regularization within LoRA, which reduces overfitting to seen tasks and improves the generalization ability on unseen tasks. Our research also uncovers the inherent connection between learning capacity and generalization capabilities, contributing to robust and parameter-efficient fine-tuning.

6. Limitations

We discuss limitations of our work that hopefully could inspire future research in this avenue.

Limited Exploration of Low-Rank Adaptation: Our study primarily investigates the generalization capabilities of models with different learning capacities by varying the rank of LoRA within the attention layers of transformers. Although this aligns with prior research that has predominantly applied LoRA within the attention layers, we leave the exploration of extending the application of low-rank adaptation to the entire transformer architecture as important future work.

Limited Exploration of Base Model: Due to constraints in computational resources and time, our experiments are conducted exclusively on the LLaMA-7B. While this model serves as an illustrative example, it may not fully represent the broader landscape of large language models. Extending our investigation to a wider range of models with varying scales and architectures could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the connection between learning capacity and generalization performance.

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