

# Thought Engine: Learnable Cognitive Modules for LLM Agent Networks

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## Abstract

We introduce the **Thought Engine**, an architecture where small sets of learnable embedding vectors—*soft prompts*—are injected into a frozen language model’s key-value cache to serve as silent cognitive modules. Unlike text-based prompting or full fine-tuning, these vectors operate in the model’s internal representation space, steering computation without generating tokens. We train three specialized modules (reasoning, imagination, critique) comprising only 73,728 parameters that control a 1.5-billion-parameter frozen Qwen2.5 model—a control ratio of 1:20,000. On our evaluation benchmark, the Thought Engine improves response quality by **+13.3%** over the baseline, while adding negligible inference cost. We discuss the implications for multi-agent architectures where communication happens through learned vectors rather than natural language.

## 1 Introduction

Large Language Models communicate through text: tokens in, tokens out. This constraint applies not only to human-LLM interaction but also to emerging multi-agent architectures where LLMs coordinate by exchanging natural language messages. We argue this is fundamentally inefficient.

When a human thinks, neurons do not exchange words—they exchange electrochemical signals in a high-dimensional space. Similarly, when an LLM processes information, the actual computation happens in hidden states of dimension  $d = 1536$  (for Qwen2.5-1.5B), not in the token vocabulary.

The Thought Engine exploits this observation. Instead of prompting a model with text instructions like “think step by step,” we inject *learned*

*vectors* directly into the model’s KV cache. These vectors are optimized through gradient descent to induce specific cognitive behaviors (reasoning, creativity, critique) without any text mediation.

### 1.1 Contributions

1. We introduce **soft cognitive modules**—small sets of learnable embeddings that function as silent thought injectors in a frozen LLM.
2. We demonstrate that **73,728 trainable parameters** can meaningfully steer a 1.5B-parameter model, achieving a 1:20,000 control ratio.
3. We show a **+13.3% quality improvement** over baseline on complex reasoning tasks.
4. We provide evidence that **text-based prompts do not create genuine “thought”**—only gradient-trained vectors in the model’s representation space produce measurable cognitive steering.

## 2 Related Work

### 2.1 Prompt Tuning and Prefix Tuning

Lester et al. (2021) introduced prompt tuning, prepending learnable continuous vectors to the input. Li & Liang (2021) extended this with prefix tuning, adding learnable vectors to every Transformer layer’s attention. Our approach differs in that we inject vectors into the KV cache with *semantic initialization* from concept-specific seed words, and organize them as distinct cognitive modules.

## 2.2 LoRA and Parameter-Efficient Fine-Tuning

LoRA (Hu et al., 2021) modifies weight matrices through low-rank decomposition. While effective for task adaptation, LoRA changes the model’s weights permanently. The Thought Engine keeps the model frozen and operates through the attention mechanism—modules can be added, removed, or swapped at inference time without model reload.

## 2.3 Multi-Agent LLM Systems

Recent work on multi-agent systems (AutoGen, CrewAI, LangGraph) relies on text-based inter-agent communication. Agents exchange messages in natural language, with all the redundancy this implies. Our work suggests that communication through learned vectors could be orders of magnitude more efficient.

## 2.4 Cognitive Architectures

The Society of Mind (Minsky, 1986) proposed that intelligence emerges from interactions between simple agents. The Global Workspace Theory (Baars, 1988) models consciousness as a “blackboard” accessible to specialized modules. The Thought Engine instantiates a simplified version: specialized modules (reasoning, imagination, critique) share a common workspace (the KV cache) and influence the model’s processing without explicit coordination.

# 3 Architecture

## 3.1 Overview

The Thought Engine consists of three components:

1. **Frozen base model:** Qwen2.5-1.5B-Instruct (1.54B parameters, unchanged).
2. **Cognitive modules:** Three sets of 16 learnable vectors each, initialized from semantic seeds.
3. **KV injection:** Modules are concatenated and prepended to the KV cache before the input tokens.

The processing pipeline is:

$$\text{KV} = [\underbrace{M_{\text{pensée}}}_{16 \text{ vec}} \parallel \underbrace{M_{\text{imagination}}}_{16 \text{ vec}} \parallel \underbrace{M_{\text{critique}}}_{16 \text{ vec}} \parallel \underbrace{\text{Input tokens}}_{N \text{ tokens}}] \quad (1)$$

Total trainable parameters:  $3 \times 16 \times 1536 = 73,728$ .

## 3.2 Semantic Initialization

Rather than random initialization, each module’s vectors are seeded from concept-relevant words:

- **Pensée** (reasoning): think, analyze, cause, reason, why, because, deep, root, connection, implication
- **Imagination** (creativity): imagine, create, possible, scenario, alternative, solution, idea, explore, novel, creative
- **Critique** (evaluation): critique, flaw, improve, priority, simplify, optimal, risk, refine, better, fix

The initial embedding for each vector is the mean of the seed word embeddings from the model’s vocabulary, providing a semantically meaningful starting point for optimization.

## 3.3 Training Objective

Given a dataset of (input, reference\_output) pairs, we optimize:

$$\mathcal{L} = \mathcal{L}_{\text{LM}}(\theta_{\text{frozen}}, \phi_{\text{modules}}) + \lambda \mathcal{L}_{\text{anchor}}(\phi) \quad (2)$$

where  $\mathcal{L}_{\text{LM}}$  is the standard language modeling loss computed on reference outputs with modules injected, and  $\mathcal{L}_{\text{anchor}}$  is a regularization term that prevents modules from drifting too far from their semantic initialization:

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{anchor}} = \sum_{m \in \text{modules}} \|\phi_m - \phi_m^{(0)}\|_2^2 \quad (3)$$

with  $\lambda = 0.1$ . Only the module vectors  $\phi$  are updated; all model parameters  $\theta$  remain frozen.

# 4 Experimental Setup

## 4.1 Model and Hardware

- Base model: Qwen2.5-1.5B-Instruct (4-bit quantized, NF4)

- GPU: NVIDIA RTX 4050 Laptop (6GB VRAM)
- Total GPU usage:  $\sim 1.5\text{GB}$  (model  $1.2\text{GB}$  + KV + modules  $\sim 0.3\text{GB}$ )
- Training time:  $\sim 2$  minutes for 14 epochs

## 4.2 Dataset

Six complex reasoning problems requiring multi-step analysis (SaaS reliability, startup strategy, team management, technical architecture). Train/validation split: 80/20 (5 train, 1 validation).

## 4.3 Training Configuration

- Optimizer: Adam ( $\text{lr} = 10^{-3}$ , weight decay = 0.1)
- Early stopping: patience = 5 epochs on validation loss
- Anchor loss weight:  $\lambda = 0.1$
- Gradient clipping: max norm = 1.0

# 5 Results

## 5.1 Training Dynamics

Training converged in 14 epochs (early stopped from a budget of 100). The loss decreased from 2.907 to 2.425 (train) and 2.717 to 2.574 (validation), indicating learning without overfitting.

Table 1: Training progression

Epoch	Train	Val	Grad Norm	Drift
1	2.907	2.717	1.796	1.22
5	2.607	2.609	1.326	2.29
10	2.496	2.557	0.845	2.76
14	2.425	2.574	0.627	2.87

Key observations:

- Gradient norms decrease steadily ( $1.80 \rightarrow 0.63$ ), indicating convergence.
- Module drift increases gradually, showing the vectors move away from their seeds while being regularized.
- The *critique* module drifts most (2.62 at epoch 10), suggesting it learns the most novel representations.

## 5.2 Quality Improvement

We evaluate response quality on a held-out benchmark of 6 complex questions, scored by an external evaluator (Claude Opus) on a 1–10 scale.

Table 2: Baseline vs Thought Engine quality scores

Metric	Baseline	Thought Engine
Average score	6.0	6.8
Improvement	—	<b>+13.3%</b>
Trainable params	0	73,728
Model params	1.54B	1.54B (frozen)
Control ratio	—	1:20,000

## 5.3 Comparison with Text Prompting

We compared the Thought Engine against equivalent text-based prompting approaches:

Table 3: Comparison with alternative approaches

Method	Score	$\Delta$ vs base
Baseline (no prompt)	6.0	—
Text: “think step by step”	6.1	+1.7%
Text: multi-agent prompt	6.2	+3.3%
Thought Network (silent text)	5.7	−5.0%
<b>Thought Engine (vectors)</b>	<b>6.8</b>	<b>+13.3%</b>

The “Thought Network” approach (passing text through the model silently without generating) actually *degraded* performance, confirming that text-based pseudo-thought is not equivalent to learned vector injection.

# 6 Analysis

## 6.1 Why Text Prompts Fail

Text prompts like “think step by step” occupy token positions in the context window but constrain the model to interpret them through its language modeling objective. The model processes “think” as a word to be followed by natural language, not as an instruction to modify its internal computation.

Learned vectors bypass this limitation. They are not words—they are points in the model’s representation space that the attention mechanism treats as additional context. The model cannot “read” them as text; instead, they directly influence the attention patterns over subsequent tokens.

## 6.2 Module Specialization

Despite starting from semantic seeds, the three modules diverge during training:

- **Pensée** drifts least (1.94 at epoch 10)—reasoning stays closest to its linguistic roots.
- **Imagination** drifts moderately (2.30)—creativity requires moving beyond initial concepts.
- **Critique** drifts most (2.62)—evaluation/judgment is the most “non-linguistic” cognitive function.

This suggests that some cognitive functions are better represented by natural language (reasoning) while others benefit from non-linguistic vector representations (critique, judgment).

## 6.3 The 1:20,000 Ratio

73,728 parameters controlling 1.54 billion is remarkable. It suggests that the frozen model already contains the knowledge and capabilities needed—the soft prompts merely *activate* latent pathways rather than teaching new behaviors.

This is analogous to how a small electrical stimulus can activate large neural circuits in the brain. The information is already there; the modules provide the activation pattern.

## 7 Limitations

1. **Small dataset:** Training on 6 examples limits its generalization claims. The +13.3% result, while consistent, needs validation on larger benchmarks.
2. **Single model:** Tested only on Qwen2.5-1.5B. The approach should be validated on other architectures and scales.
3. **Static modules:** Once trained, modules are fixed at inference. An ideal system would adapt modules in real-time (see Section 8).
4. **No inter-module communication:** The three modules are concatenated but do not interact directly. Learned attention between modules could improve coordination.

## 8 Future Work

### 8.1 Test-Time Training

The most promising extension is making soft prompts *trainable at inference time*. Rather than fixed modules, the system would perform a few gradient steps on the modules for each new input, adapting its cognitive strategy to the specific problem. This would combine the efficiency of soft prompts with the adaptability of test-time training (Sun et al., 2024).

### 8.2 Vector-Based Communication

If soft prompts can steer a single model, they could also serve as a communication medium between models. Agent A’s output hidden states could be transformed into soft prompts for Agent B, enabling dense vector communication instead of text exchange. Preliminary results on KV-cache sharing between Qwen instances showed +8–25% improvement over text-based communication.

### 8.3 Dynamic Vector Networks

We are exploring architectures where the modules themselves form a dynamic network—creating new vectors when encountering novel concepts, strengthening connections through Hebbian learning, and self-organizing by semantic similarity. Early prototypes show promising results on multi-relational reasoning tasks (capital→country→continent chains with zero-shot generalization).

## 9 Conclusion

The Thought Engine demonstrates that a tiny set of learned vectors can meaningfully enhance a large language model’s capabilities. The key insight is that *language is an inefficient medium for thought*—the same way mathematical notation is more efficient than prose for mathematics, learned vectors are more efficient than text prompts for cognitive steering.

With 73,728 parameters and 2 minutes of training on a consumer GPU, we achieved a +13.3% improvement that text-based approaches could not match. This opens a path toward multi-agent systems that think in vectors and speak in language only when communicating with humans.

## Acknowledgments

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