Beyond Spurious Reflection: Strategic Self-Correction in LLMs via Role-Aware Reinforcement Learning

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Abstract

Large reasoning models excel by scaling inference-time Chain-of-Thought, yet their performance is brittle: an early mistake corrupts all subsequent reasoning. Reinforcement-learning-trained reasoners often produce reflective phrases like "wait, let me reconsider," but growing evidence shows these reflections are largely spurious—they neither alter reasoning paths nor final answers. Existing self-reflection methods keep the faulty chain in context, forcing the model to overcome its own errors. We propose REFLECT+, an end-to-end framework that directly optimizes reflection-triggered self-correction. Building on the Clean-Slate Reflection paradigm—where the model emits a structured `<reflection>` block summarizing verified sub-conclusions, diagnosed mistakes, and corrected directions, then continues from the problem and reflection alone—REFLECT+ adopts a two-stage training scheme combining supervised cold-start and role-aware reinforcement learning. This enables strategic decisions on when to reflect, what to retain, and how to resume. Experiments on Qwen2.5-Math-1.5B across MATH500, AMC23, GSM8K, LogiQA, GPQA, and MMLU-Pro evaluate both self-correction quality and reasoning accuracy.

1 Introduction

Large reasoning models have demonstrated remarkable performance on complex tasks such as mathematical reasoning, logical reasoning, and code reasoning (DeepSeek-AI, 2025; Shao et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2024). These gains primarily stem from *inference-time scaling*: generating long chains-of-thought that enable problem decomposition, trajectory planning, multi-step deduction, and self-reflection (Wei et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2023). Among these capabilities, *self-correction* has emerged as a key paradigm: the model is allowed to revise its own reasoning before producing a final answer (Kamoi et al., 2024; Weng et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2023). A typical self-correction process involves reflecting on a suspected mistake and then retrying—often by appending a reflection and a new reasoning attempt to the existing context.

However, current self-correction mechanisms suffer from two critical defects. **First, *spurious reflection*.** RL-trained reasoners frequently emit reflective phrases such as "let me reconsider", yet these phrases neither change the reasoning direction nor affect the final answer (Yeo et al., 2025; Chen et al., 2025; Turpin et al., 2023; Lanham et al., 2023). In many cases, the reflection acts more like commentary on top of an already-corrupted derivation than a genuine redirection of reasoning. **Second, *useless retry*.** Even when a reflection is semantically meaningful, existing reflect-then-retry pipelines keep the faulty chain in the continuation prompt (Shinn et al., 2023; Madaan et al., 2023; Gou et al., 2024; Shi et al., 2026), forcing the model to learn to ignore its own misleading earlier output—a burden that limits correction quality. One important limitation of current RL paradigms is the lack of explicit training signals for reflection quality. Current RL paradigms treat reflection as just another token sequence, providing no structured feedback on *whether* a reflection is necessary, *what* it should contain, or *how* to continue afterwards. Consequently, current models learn to mimic reflective formats without gaining genuine strategic control over the entire correction process.

To address the above challenges, we propose **REFLECT+**, an end-to-end framework that directly optimises reflection-triggered self-correction. Building on the Clean-Slate Reflection paradigm (Figure 1)—where the model detects its own errors and writes a structured summary to redirect its reasoning—our approach proceeds in two stages: **Stage 1: Supervised cold-start.** We first teach the model to produce structured reflection blocks (a summary of the mistake and a redirection plan) and to solve problems conditioned on such reflec-

tions. **Stage 2: Role-aware RL.** We then optimise the strategic decisions—*when* to reflect, *what* to summarise, and *how* to continue—via explicit reward signals that distinguish format compliance from correction effectiveness. This RL stage employs a credit assignment mechanism tailored to the multi-role generation structure. It balances and normalizes rewards across different events and token positions, ensuring that both format compliance and correction effectiveness are properly rewarded (Figure 1).

Empirically, on Qwen2.5-Math-1.5B across MATH500, AMC23, GSM8K, LogiQA, GPQA and MMLU-Pro, REFLECT+ improves average accuracy over vanilla GRPO from 36.8% to 42.6% and achieves the best overall pass@32 (93.2%). The learned reflection policy reflects selectively, with trigger rates ranging from 12.2% on GSM8K to 27.5% on the more challenging AMC23 benchmark. Further analyses show that adaptive reflection timing significantly outperforms forced interruption strategies, and that clean-slate continuation conditioned only on the reflection r consistently surpasses both error-prefix-only (x, y^-) and appended-reflection (x, y^-, r) continuations, showinging benefit of discarding the faulty context.

2 Related Work

Early work on self-correction found that language models often fail to revise their answers without external feedback (Huang et al., 2024; Pan et al., 2024), and that CoT explanations can be unfaithful to the model's internal computation (Turpin et al., 2023; Lanham et al., 2023). More recent studies on RL-trained reasoners report that long CoT are filled with repetitive, shallow reflections that do not alter the final answer (Yeo et al., 2025; Chen et al., 2025; Hu et al., 2026). These findings suggest that reflection must be not only present but also strategically effective.

To address this, existing methods have evolved along two complementary directions. The first imposes constraints on when and how reflection occurs. Reflexion (Shinn et al., 2023), Self-Refine (Madaan et al., 2023), and CRITIC (Gou et al., 2024) insert explicit critique or verification loops, forcing the model to pause and evaluate its own output. Self-Verification (Weng et al., 2023) and Self-Debug (Chen et al., 2023) apply similar ideas to mathematical and code reasoning. While these approaches improve correction rates, they typically rely on fixed schedules or external verifiers. More importantly, they always append the reflection to the original faulty chain. The model must therefore learn to ignore its own prior mistakes—which becomes increasingly burdensome as the chain grows.

The second direction treats self-correction as a policy optimisation problem. Recent work (Shi et al., 2026) uses RL to learn when a revision attempt is likely to improve accuracy beyond fixed heuristics. However, these methods keep the entire previous trajectory in the context, and their reward signals do not explicitly distinguish a meaningful reflection from a spurious one (Turpin et al., 2023).

In contrast, the REFLECT+ framework introduces three key innovations. First, unlike prior work that appends reflections to corrupted chains, we adopt the Clean-Slate Reflection paradigm, which discards the faulty prefix and treats the reflection as a compact state replacement. Second, we optimize *when* to reflect, *what* to summarize, and *how* to continue via role-aware RL with explicit, format-gated rewards. Third, our two-stage training separates format acquisition from strategic usage, ensuring the model learns not just to produce reflections but to deploy them adaptively. Together, these advances transform self-correction from post-hoc commentary into genuine state replacement.

3 Methods

In this section, we present the training process for REFLECT+ (see Figure 1). We first introduce the Clean-Slate Reflection reasoning paradigm as the foundation of our approach (Section 3.1). We then describe the two-phase cold-start procedure, which enables the model to acquire the reflection format and the reflection-based solving skill (Section 3.2). Finally, we provide a detailed description of the RL strategy that optimises the complete reflection-triggered trajectory end-to-end (Section 3.3).

3.1 Clean-Slate Reflection Reasoning

We first contrast the vanilla reasoning paradigm with Clean-Slate Reflection paradigm to clarify the structural differences that motivate our approach.

Vanilla reasoning paradigm. Most existing reasoning models, following the format represented by DeepSeek-R1 (DeepSeek-AI, 2025), give outputs consisting of a long reasoning trace and a concise conclusion. When the model encounters a mistake mid-trace, it can only *append* a reflective phrase;

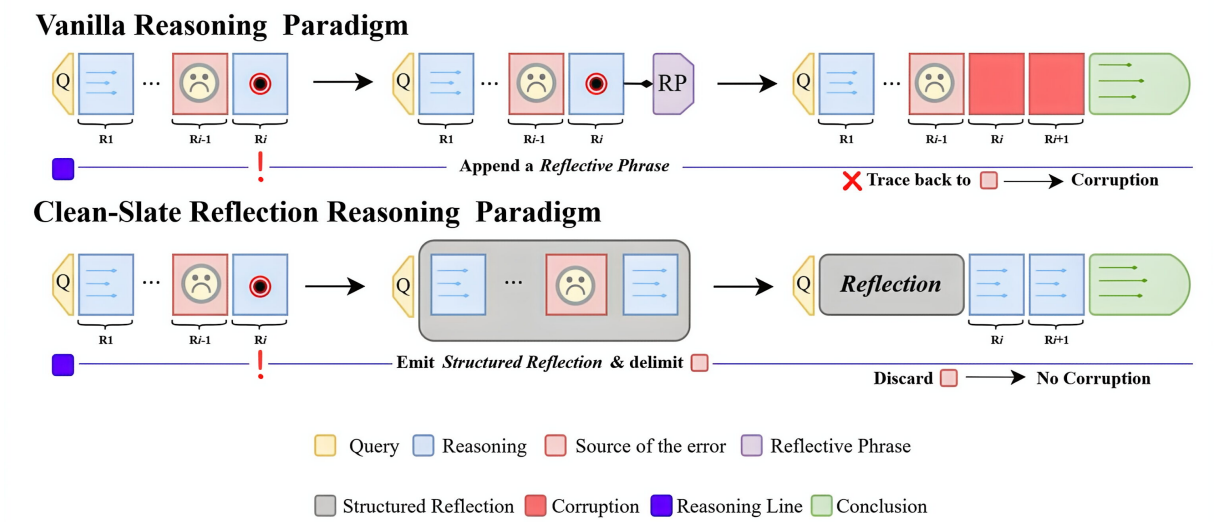

Figure 1: Clean-Slate Reflection reasoning paradigm vs. Vanilla reasoning paradigm. Upper panel: Vanilla can not trace back to the source of error when encounters a mistake mid-trace, it only appends a reflective phrase. Lower panel: Clean-Slate Reflection treats reflection as a state replacement to decouple self-correction from the context.

the faulty derivation remains in the context and continues to bias every subsequent token. Therefore, this paradigm suffers from anchor failure, spurious reflection, and context corruption.

Clean-Slate Reflection reasoning paradigm. Clean-Slate Reflection decouples self-correction from context preservation by treating the reflection as a *state replacement* rather than appended commentary. For a query x, the model produces a partial reasoning chain y^-. When it detects that y^- is wrong, it emits a structured reflection r :

$$r \sim p_\theta(r \mid x, y^-), \tag{1}$$

where r is delimited by `<reflection>` `...</reflection>`, which contains three explicit fields: the verified sub-conclusions before the error, a one-sentence diagnosis of the mistake, and a one-sentence corrected direction. The continuation is then sampled from the *rebuilt* prompt:

$$y^+ \sim p_\theta(y^+ \mid x, r). \tag{2}$$

The faulty prefix y^- is not part of the continuation context; the reflection is the only carry-over. Nested reflections follow the same rule: if y^+ contains another reflection r', the next continuation is sampled from (x, r'). We cap the number of reflection events per trajectory at two. Figure 1 contrasts this with vanilla appended reflection.

The key distinction from vanilla reasoning is that each post-reflection iteration operates in a *purified* context: the model sees only the original query and the most recent reflection, not the faulty derivation that triggered it. This design is intended to achieve two goals simultaneously: it bounds the influence of any local mistake to the tokens before reflection, and it forces the model to distil essential progress into a reflection that supports subsequent reasoning.

3.2 Cold Start

Before applying RL, we perform a cold-start stage that teaches the model the basic format of Clean-Slate Reflection-style reasoning. We transform existing supervised data into reflection format through automatic error localisation, and fine-tune the model in two phases that separately target reflection generation and reflection-conditioned solving.

Data transformation. We construct cold-start data from the hard split of Big-Math (Albalak et al., 2025). For each problem, Qwen2.5-Math-1.5B first samples a reasoning trajectory, which is then verified for correctness. Incorrect trajectories are transformed by a strong API teacher into Clean-Slate Reflection training instances containing an error prefix, a structured reflection, and a corrected continuation, while correct minimal solutions are retained as direct-solving examples. This converts a vanilla pair (x, y) into:

$$(x, y) \xrightarrow{\text{teacher}} \begin{cases} (x, y^-, r, y^+) & \text{if reflective,} \\ (x, y) & \text{if perfect.} \end{cases} \tag{3}$$

We mix reflective and perfect samples during SFT; otherwise the model collapses to reflecting on nearly every problem. Full construction details, teacher schema, and training statistics are provided in Appendix C.

Two-phase supervised initialisation. We treat `<reflection>` and `</reflection>` as plain text markers (no embedding resize) and fine-tune Qwen2.5-Math-1.5B with a LoRA (Hu et al., 2021) adapter (hyper-parameters are in Appendix C).

In Phase 1 (error-prefix → reflection), the supervision target is r; the system prompt, the problem, and the faulty prefix y^- are masked from the loss:

$$\mathcal{L}_{\mathrm{p1}} = -\sum_{t=1}^{|r|} \log p_\theta\big(r_t \mid x, y^-, r_{<t}\big). \tag{4}$$

On perfect instances the entire solution is the supervision target with no y^-; the model is supervised *not* to emit a reflection.

In Phase 2 (reflection → solution), Phase 1's adapter continues training without being merged into the base, so the same low-rank subspace keeps being refined. The supervision target is y^+ with r included in the prompt but masked from the loss:

$$\mathcal{L}_{\mathrm{p2}} = -\sum_{t=1}^{|y^+|} \log p_\theta\big(y_t^+ \mid x, r, y_{<t}^+\big). \tag{5}$$

Crucially, y^- no longer appears in the context: Phase 2 trains the model to solve from the reflection alone, matching the form required at RL inference. To prevent catastrophic forgetting, Phase 2 mixes three example types—reflection-to-solution (main objective), Phase-1 replay (preserves reflection generation), and perfect samples (preserves direct solving)—with the mixing ratio reported in Appendix C. After this stage the model can produce syntactically valid reflection blocks and solve from a reflection alone, but it has not learned *when* a reflection should fire, *what* sub-conclusions to carry, or how to adapt depth to difficulty; these capabilities require role-level optimisation in the RL stage.

3.3 Reinforcement Learning

The cold-start stage teaches the model the reflection format; the RL stage then teaches its strategic use. We adapt GRPO (Shao et al., 2024) to the structure of reflection-triggered reasoning, where a single problem yields a trajectory that may include one or more clean-slate reflection events.

Rollout. For each problem x we draw G rollouts using a vLLM rollout engine that implements the Clean-Slate Reflection prompt rebuild: whenever a complete `<reflection>...</reflection>` block is emitted, the engine discards the pre-reflection text from the continuation prompt and re-seeds generation from (x, r) before resuming sampling. Nested reflections follow the same rule, up to a cap of two reflection events per trajectory (i.e. at most three generation rounds: an initial chain, optionally a first reflection-triggered continuation, and optionally a second). A rollout terminates when (i) the model gives a final answer, (ii) reflection depth reaches the cap, or (iii) the maximum response length is reached. Each rollout is therefore either a *direct* trajectory (no reflection, denoted as o^{dir}) or a *reflection-triggered* trajectory (denoted as o^{ref}).

Reward. We assign a single scalar reward to each rollout. A direct rollout that produces a correct answer receives the binary task reward; a direct rollout that produces a wrong answer receives a small wrong-no-reflect penalty, which encourages the model to attempt reflection rather than silently fail on solvable problems:

$$R^{\mathrm{dir}} = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{correct,} \\ -\big((n_w - 1)/\phi\big)^2 & \text{wrong,} \end{cases} \tag{6}$$

with $n_w{=}3$, $\phi{=}4$. A reflection-triggered rollout combines a correctness term, an efficiency factor (penalizing over-reflection), and a multiplicative format gate:

$$R^{\mathrm{ref}} \;=\; \mathbf{1}[\hat{a}{=}a^\star] \;\cdot\; R_{\mathrm{eff}} \;\cdot\; g_{\mathrm{fmt}}, \tag{7}$$

where $R_{\mathrm{eff}} = 1 - \big((d - d_{\mathrm{free}})_+/\phi\big)^2$ with depth d (the number of reflection events in the trajectory), free budget $d_{\mathrm{free}}{=}1$, and $\phi{=}4$. The first reflection is cost-free; only deeper reflections incur a smooth quadratic penalty. The format gate $g_{\mathrm{fmt}} \in \{0, 1\}$ requires every `<reflection>...</reflection>` block to contain the cues "so far I have" and "however"; when any block is malformed, $g_{\mathrm{fmt}}{=}0$ zeroes the entire reward, preventing the policy from gaming the binary task signal with reflection-shaped but structurally invalid outputs. Importantly, the format gate only enforces a minimal structural constraint; semantic usefulness is determined by downstream task success and policy advantage.

Counterfactual-baseline advantage. For each prompt x we partition its G rollouts into a direct

sub-group and a reflection sub-group and compute advantages relative to a *per-prompt counterfactual baseline*: the mean reward μ_x^{dir} of the direct sub-group. Both sub-groups are standardised against the full-group standard deviation σ_x:

$$A_i = \frac{R_i - \mu_x^{\text{dir}}}{\sigma_x + \varepsilon}, \tag{8}$$

applied to direct and reflection samples alike. The intuition is that reflection should be judged against the same problem's direct attempt rather than against an indiscriminate group mean: a reflection rollout that succeeds where direct attempts fail receives strong positive advantage, while one that fails on a problem the direct rollouts mostly solve is correctly discouraged. When a prompt has no direct rollout, we fall back to the full-group mean.

Difficulty-gated advantage floor. Equation 8 alone causes reflection to collapse on easy prompts: when most direct rollouts succeed ($\mu_x^{\text{dir}} \approx 1$), a reflection rollout that fails—or that succeeds but pays the efficiency factor in Eq. 7—is strongly negatively advantaged even when the reflection itself was reasonable. The policy then learns to suppress reflection altogether and forfeits the option on the few hard prompts that genuinely need it. We address this with a *difficulty-gated* asymmetric floor applied only to reflection samples:

$$\tilde{A}_i^{\text{ref}} = w_x \cdot \max\!\left(A_i^{\text{ref}},\, A_{\text{floor}}\right) + (1 - w_x) \cdot A_i^{\text{ref}}, \tag{9}$$

where $w_x = \text{clip}(\mu_x^{\text{dir}}, 0, 1)$ is the per-prompt difficulty gate and $A_{\text{floor}} = -0.5$. On easy prompts ($w_x \to 1$) the floor is fully active and damps the negative gradient on unsuccessful reflections, preserving the policy's freedom to explore reflection without being crushed for it. On hard prompts ($w_x \to 0$) the floor is disabled and the full reflection gradient flows—exactly where reflection is the only chance of recovery. The mechanism is asymmetric in two senses: it leaves positive advantages untouched, and the gating scales with prompts' empirical difficulty rather than with a global schedule.

Policy gradient. Tokens are optimised with the asymmetric PPO-clip surrogate (Schulman et al., 2017) (clip range in Appendix D). Writing $\rho_t = \pi_\theta(o_t)/\pi_{\theta_{\text{old}}}(o_t)$ and $c_\epsilon(\rho_t) := \text{clip}(\rho_t,\, 1-\epsilon_{\text{lo}},\, 1+\epsilon_{\text{hi}})$, the objective is

$$\mathcal{J}(\theta) = \mathbb{E}_t\Big[\min\!\big(\rho_t \hat{A}_t,\; c_\epsilon(\rho_t)\, \hat{A}_t\big)\Big], \tag{10}$$

with the scalar advantage from Eq. 8 / 9 broadcast to every response token including the pre-reflection prefix; this gradient on pre-reflection tokens is what teaches the model *when* to pivot to `<reflection>` rather than continue with another erroneous step.

Training stability. When all G rollouts of a prompt share the same outcome, the group standard deviation may become extremely small, and dividing by σ_x in Eq. 8 can amplify small stochastic reward differences into disproportionately large normalized advantages. We skip standardisation for such uniform-outcome groups (optimiser stack and other training-time safeguards in Appendix D).

4 Experiments

Training. We conduct experiments on Qwen2.5-Math-1.5B (Yang et al., 2024). Cold start uses the reflection-augmented Big-Math corpus (Section 3.2) and a quota-aware pool of API teachers, with LoRA (Hu et al., 2021) SFT (Appendix C). For RL, we train on a math-focused split using `verl` (Sheng et al., 2024). Hyper-parameters, the task verifier, and the format gate regular expression are described in Appendix B and Appendix D.

Evaluation. We evaluate all four configurations on the six benchmarks reported in Table 1: the math benchmarks MATH500 (Hendrycks et al., 2021), AMC23, and GSM8K, together with LogiQA (logical reasoning), GPQA (Rein et al., 2023) (graduate-level science), and MMLU-Pro (broad knowledge). For MATH500, AMC23, GSM8K, LogiQA, and GPQA. Details shown in Appendix E.

Extended experiments and analyses. We extend experiments and analyses in the appendix, covering: (i) the failure-mode taxonomy that motivates our design (Appendix A); (ii) the format-gate regular expression and reward hyper-parameters (Appendix B); (iii) per-step reflection trigger rate, depth distribution, and recovery/regression statistics over training (Appendix F); (iv) a reflection-template example (Appendix G); (v) representative continuation case studies (Appendix H); and (vi) recovery on hard reflection points (Appendix I).

4.1 Main Results

Table 1 reports mean accuracy and pass@32 on six evaluation benchmarks for the untrained Qwen2.5-Math-1.5B backbone (**Base**), the cold-start **SFT** model, a vanilla **GRPO** baseline, and **REFLECT+**.

Model	MATH500		AMC23		GSM8K		LogiQA		GPQA		MMLU-Pro		Avg.	
	avg	p@32	avg	p@32	avg	p@32	avg	p@32	avg	p@32	avg	p@32	avg	p@32
Base	18.1	87.4	14.8	80.0	16.1	92.0	9.4	90.0	4.3	71.7	5.4	–	11.3	84.2
SFT	49.1	89.6	24.3	72.5	57.6	97.0	28.2	**98.4**	**20.6**	**96.5**	20.2	–	33.3	90.8
GRPO	61.7	**92.2**	**42.1**	85.0	71.8	**98.5**	21.7	97.5	9.8	84.3	13.8	–	36.8	91.5
REFLECT+	**66.5**	89.0	39.6	**90.0**	**79.7**	96.4	**28.8**	97.6	18.6	92.9	**22.5**	–	**42.6**	**93.2**

Table 1: Main results on six benchmarks (%, mean accuracy and pass@32). MATH500, AMC23, GSM8K, LogiQA, and GPQA use 32 samples with temperature 1.0; MMLU-Pro uses greedy decoding, so pass@32 is not applicable. *Avg. avg* averages all six benchmarks, while *Avg. p@32* averages the five multi-sample benchmarks. **Base**: pretrained Qwen2.5-Math-1.5B; **SFT**: cold-start model; **GRPO**: vanilla GRPO baseline; REFLECT+: difficulty-gated reflection RL. Best results are in **bold**.

We organize the discussion around two empirical patterns that mirror the structure of the paradigm.

REFLECT+ improves overall RL reasoning performance. REFLECT+ improves the average accuracy over the vanilla GRPO baseline on five of the six benchmarks: MATH500 (66.5 vs. 61.7), GSM8K (79.7 vs. 71.8), LogiQA (28.8 vs. 21.7), GPQA (18.6 vs. 9.8), and MMLU-Pro (22.5 vs. 13.8). AMC23 is the exception in average accuracy (39.6 vs. 42.1), but REFLECT+ obtains the best AMC23 pass@32 (90.0). Overall, REFLECT+ achieves the highest Avg. *avg* (42.6) and Avg. p@32 (93.2), suggesting that reflection-triggered RL can improve end-to-end reasoning performance relative to vanilla long-CoT RL across benchmarks.

REFLECT+ retains direct solving on easy problems. Beyond accuracy, REFLECT+ reshapes the trade-off between self-correction and decoding cost. As cold-start mixes perfect samples with reflection samples and the RL format gate denies credit to malformed `<reflection></reflection>` spans, the trained model preserves direct solving on easier problems while concentrating reflections on harder cases. The reflection diagnostics in Table 6 support this: the trigger rate is 12.2% on GSM8K, 18.3% on MATH500, and 27.5% on AMC23 rather than collapsing into reflection on every example, in contrast to vanilla long-CoT models where "reflective" phrases often appear without changing the answer (Yeo et al., 2025; Chen et al., 2025).

4.2 REFLECT+ Enhances Self-Correction

Through end-to-end optimisation, REFLECT+ enables reasoning models to acquire *effective* and *efficient* self-correction capabilities. Effective self-correction is challenged by three key questions. *When to reflect* determines the appropriate timing for switching from direct solving to reflection-triggered correction, influencing the trade-off between exploration and exploitation. *What to reflect* defines the mechanism by which essential reasoning states are distilled and propagated to the rebuilt continuation. *How to continue* specifies how the model conditions future reasoning steps on the compressed reflection while ignoring the discarded prefix. We further examine whether the resulting policy remains robust against spurious reflection.

Strategy	MATH500	GSM8K	AMC23	Avg.
w/o RL				
REFLECT+ (adaptive)	**49.8**	58.3	**22.2**	43.4
Random trigger	47.6	**62.4**	20.9	**43.6**
Fixed trigger	44.3	59.5	20.0	41.3
w RL				
REFLECT+ (adaptive)	**66.6**	**78.3**	**38.8**	**61.2**
Random trigger	55.0	71.4	25.9	50.8
Fixed trigger	50.8	67.5	21.6	46.6

Table 2: Comparison of in-distribution accuracy (mean@8, %) across reflection-timing strategies. "Random" interrupts after a uniformly sampled token budget $B \sim U[128, 768]$; "Fixed" interrupts after B=256 tokens; REFLECT+ lets the model decide adaptively. Sampling: n=8, temperature 1.0.

When to reflect. To analyse the practical effect of REFLECT+ for models following the reflection-triggered paradigm, we introduce two alternative interruption strategies for ablation. The first is **Fixed**: the model is forcibly interrupted after a fixed budget of B=256 tokens and required to emit a reflection. The second is **Random**: the model is interrupted after a budget sampled uniformly from $[128, 768]$ tokens. We compare these against the adaptive trigger learned by REFLECT+, evaluated on the three in-distribution math benchmarks MATH500, GSM8K, and AMC23 in Table 2. Under RL, REFLECT+'s adaptive trigger consistently outperforms both forced strategies: $+15.8/+11.6$ points over Fixed/Random

Source of r	MATH500	GSM8K	AMC23	Avg.
w/o RL				
Internal (REFLECT+)	44.7	60.5	19.7	41.6
External (Qwen2.5-3B)	44.2	61.3	19.9	41.8
External (Qwen2.5-7B)	45.8	65.3	29.9	47.0
w RL				
Internal (REFLECT+)	33.4	52.3	14.4	33.4
External (Qwen2.5-3B)	32.4	53.5	6.4	30.8
External (Qwen2.5-7B)	33.2	56.8	23.8	37.9

Table 3: Internal vs. external reflections (mean@8, %). At inference time we replace the model-generated reflection r with one produced by an external teacher and continue from the same rebuilt prompt (x, r), holding the continuer fixed. Two teachers of different sizes are evaluated: Qwen2.5-7B-Instruct and Qwen2.5-3B-Instruct. Sampling: n=8, temperature 1.0.

on MATH500, $+10.8/+6.9$ on GSM8K, and $+17.2/+12.9$ on AMC23, for an in-distribution average of 61.2% vs. $46.6\%/50.8\%$. Forcing reflection at externally imposed positions degrades performance, indicating that the gain comes from *when* the model chooses to reflect, not from the act of reflecting itself. Without RL, the three strategies are statistically indistinguishable ($43.4/43.6/41.3$ average), and Random even edges above adaptive: cold-start supervision alone is sufficient to emit reflections in the correct *format*, but provides no signal about *when* they help. Role-aware policy optimisation is what turns the adaptive trigger into a real policy, lifting it from 43.4% to 61.2% while Fixed and Random gain comparatively less ($+5.3$ and $+7.2$). Together, these three patterns show that REFLECT+ learns a difficulty-adaptive timing policy whose value is unlocked specifically by RL.

What to reflect. *What to reflect* is crucial because the reflection must preserve verified sub-conclusions and provide a corrected direction for clean-slate continuation. To evaluate reflection quality, we conduct a controlled replacement experiment: at inference time, we replace the model's own reflection r with one generated by an external teacher and continue from the rebuilt prompt (x, r) while keeping the continuer fixed. We use two off-the-shelf instruction-tuned teachers of different capacities (Qwen2.5-7B-Instruct and Qwen2.5-3B-Instruct). Results are shown in Table 3.

Without RL, the cold-start model's reflections lag the stronger 7B teacher by 5.4 points and are comparable to the smaller 3B teacher, suggesting reflection-format supervision alone is insufficient to produce reflections that support continuation.

Continuer	MATH500	GSM8K	AMC23	Avg.
SFT (w/o RL)	27.2	52.9	23.8	34.6
REFLECT+ (w RL)	33.2	56.2	25.0	38.1
Qwen2.5-3B (external)	35.4	71.2	18.8	41.8
Qwen2.5-7B (external)	46.0	80.1	24.6	50.2

Table 4: Continuation skill (mean@8, %): four continuers resume from an identical Qwen2.5-7B teacher reflection r on the same reflection points, holding both the problem x and the reflection content fixed. Any gap is attributable solely to how well the continuer can act on a given reflection. Sampling: n=8, temperature 1.0.

Under RL, the absolute performance of all reflection sources decreases (e.g., on MATH500: $45.8 \rightarrow 33.2$ for the 7B teacher and $44.2 \rightarrow 32.4$ for the 3B teacher). We attribute this to a population shift rather than degraded reflection quality: RL-trained policies trigger reflection more selectively on difficult examples, making the reflection subset substantially harder. This is consistent with the trigger statistics in Table 6, where reflection is invoked more frequently on harder and OOD benchmarks.

The meaningful comparison is therefore within the w-RL block. Here, REFLECT+'s internal reflections close the gap to the 3B teacher and even outperform it on MATH500 and AMC23 (33.4 vs. 32.4; 14.4 vs. 6.4). These results suggest that role-level optimisation improves the alignment between reflections and the model's own continuation policy, rather than imitating a generic external teacher.

How to continue. *How to continue* determines whether the model can coherently resume reasoning from the reflection without re-anchoring on the discarded prefix. In the Clean-Slate Reflection paradigm this property is enforced *structurally*: the continuation prompt is rebuilt as (x, r), so the faulty prefix is simply not available to bias subsequent tokens, removing by construction the failure mode of vanilla appended reflection. To isolate the continuation skill from the reflection content, we hold r fixed across continuers: on the reflection points captured from REFLECT+, we attach the *same* Qwen2.5-7B teacher reflection to four different continuers (SFT, REFLECT+, Qwen2.5-3B-Instruct, Qwen2.5-7B-Instruct) and let each one finish under clean-slate rebuild (x, r). Table 4 reports the results on the three in-distribution math benchmarks. REFLECT+ outperforms its SFT initialisation on every dataset, confirming that RL teaches a continuation skill rather than just a reflection-emission habit. A 1.5B-parameter continuer cannot

Continuer / input	MATH500	GSM8K	AMC23	Avg.
Reflection r from SFT				
Qwen2.5-7B: y^-	48.4	59.5	31.3	46.4
Qwen2.5-7B: $y^- + r$	56.2	70.9	37.9	55.0
Qwen2.5-7B: r	**67.1**	**85.6**	**42.9**	**65.2**
Qwen2.5-3B: y^-	41.6	58.0	26.1	41.9
Qwen2.5-3B: $y^- + r$	50.5	66.2	22.0	46.2
Qwen2.5-3B: r	**58.0**	**78.6**	**30.4**	**55.7**
Reflection r from REFLECT+				
Qwen2.5-7B: y^-	46.9	69.4	32.2	49.5
Qwen2.5-7B: $y^- + r$	45.6	71.8	20.9	46.1
Qwen2.5-7B: r	**52.2**	**77.8**	**35.4**	**55.1**
Qwen2.5-3B: y^-	41.2	64.8	19.4	41.8
Qwen2.5-3B: $y^- + r$	42.9	63.9	16.3	41.0
Qwen2.5-3B: r	**42.8**	**70.0**	**30.7**	**47.8**

Table 5: Reflection vs. error-prefix continuation (mean@8, %). Using the same reflection points, continuers resume from (x, y^-), (x, y^-, r), or the clean-slate rebuild (x, r). Reflections r are generated by either the cold-start SFT model or REFLECT+. Sampling: n=8, temperature 1.0.

close the gap to the much larger 3B/7B instruction-tuned teachers in absolute terms, but REFLECT+ is the strongest among models of its own scale, showing the gain comes from how the continuer uses a fixed reflection rather than from the reflection text or the prompt-rebuild mechanism alone (representative reflection events in Appendix H).

Reflection tag vs. error prefix. Beyond continuation skill, we also investigate whether the reflection block r itself—rather than mere access to the faulty prefix y^-—is what drives the performance gain. For each reflection point, we compare three inputs to the same continuer: the faulty prefix alone (x, y^-), the appended-reflection rebuild (x, y^-, r), and the clean-slate rebuild (x, r). As shown in Table 5, we find that conditioning solely on r consistently outperforms the other two setups, while appending r to y^- yields only mixed benefits depending on the reflection source. This confirms that (i) the reflection block captures a useful corrective signal independent of its origin, and (ii) discarding the faulty prefix—the defining feature of the Clean-Slate Reflection paradigm rebuild—provides an additive gain that does not require the reflection to override the misleading context.

Robust against spurious reflection. A defining property of REFLECT+ is that role-aware credit assignment and the format gate suppress spurious reflection. Table 6 shows two clear patterns: reflection is difficulty-adaptive, rising from 12.2% on GSM8K to 18.3% on MATH500 and 27.5% on AMC23; and on five of six benchmarks, reflection-triggered samples are less accurate than directly answered ones, indicating that reflection is invoked mainly when direct solving is likely to fail. GPQA is the only exception. Together, these results suggest that REFLECT+ learns selective self-correction rather than indiscriminate reflection.

Benchmark	Refl. acc.	Direct acc.	Trig. rate
MATH500	29.2	74.8	18.3
AMC23	13.6	49.5	27.5
GSM8K	42.4	84.9	12.2
LogiQA	27.6	30.0	51.0
GPQA	19.2	17.8	56.7
MMLU-Pro	21.4	23.8	53.6

Table 6: Reflection behaviour of REFLECT+ on each benchmark (%). *Refl. acc.* and *Direct acc.* are the accuracy on reflection-triggered and on directly-answered samples, respectively; *Trig. rate* is the fraction of samples that emit a `<reflection>` block.

5 Conclusion

We propose REFLECT+, an end-to-end framework for reflection-triggered self-correction at the role level. By separating format learning from strategy optimisation, REFLECT+ enables models to learn *when* to reflect, *what* to summarise in the reflection block, and *how* to continue afterwards. Building on the Clean-Slate Reflection paradigm, where the faulty prefix is discarded and continuation resumes from the original problem and the reflection alone, our two-phase cold-start and REFLECT+ RL objective address the spurious-reflection and context-corruption failure modes reported in prior RL-trained reasoners (Huang et al., 2024; Yeo et al., 2025; Chen et al., 2025). Experimental results and reflection diagnostics show that the learned reflection behaviour is adaptive rather than imitative, with role-level optimisation being the key factor. REFLECT+ also produces the shortest responses on average (769 tokens), reducing generation length by 17% relative to GRPO and 34% relative to the base model, suggesting improved reasoning efficiency rather than verbose deliberation. Future work may extend verification beyond math, support open-ended evaluation, calibrate trigger policies across difficulty levels, and combine Clean-Slate Reflection with process-level reward models.

6 Limitations

REFLECT+ is trained and tuned primarily on math-centric tasks where automatic answer verification is reliable. Although we additionally evaluate on LogiQA, GPQA, and MMLU-Pro, these remain exact-match multiple-choice benchmarks rather than truly open-ended free-form tasks. Extending REFLECT+ to domains such as open-ended scientific reasoning or code generation will likely require stronger task-specific verifiers or reward models. In addition, the cold-start reflection data are synthesised by API teachers, so any systematic errors in first-error localisation may be inherited by the student model. The method further assumes that the model can emit a well-formed structured reflection block; while our reward design mitigates under-triggering and over-triggering, it does not eliminate them entirely. Moreover, the clean-slate rebuild assumes that the reflection block preserves sufficient reasoning state for continuation; when critical intermediate information is omitted, the discarded prefix cannot be recovered.

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A Failure Modes of Existing Self-Correction

We catalogue three failure modes that motivate REFLECT+. *Under-trigger* occurs when the model commits to a wrong direction and never reflects; the per-prompt counterfactual baseline together with the difficulty-gated advantage floor in Section 3.3 mitigate this by giving reflection rollouts positive advantage on problems where direct attempts fail and by preventing reflection from being crushed on easy prompts. *Over-trigger* occurs when the model reflects on every problem, paying token cost for no accuracy benefit; the perfect-sample mixing in Section 3.2 and the efficiency factor R_{eff} in Eq. 7 suppress this. *Direction-preserving reflection* occurs when the reflection text is syntactically valid but semantically does not change the reasoning—the classic spurious-reflection failure of Yeo et al. (2025). Clean-slate prompt rebuild is the structural countermeasure: even when the reflection is weak, the continuation is no longer locked to the faulty prefix and is free to follow the surviving correct sub-conclusions.

B Implementation Details

Reflection prompt. The system prompt used for cold-start SFT, and carried over to the RL stage, is:

> You are a math reasoning assistant. When you make an error during reasoning, use <reflection>...</reflection> to reflect on the mistake, then continue reasoning based on the reflection.

Format-gate regular expression. A reflection block is well-formed if its body matches the case-insensitive, dotall pattern

```
\bso\s+far\s*,?\s+i\s+have\b
.*?\bhowever\b
```

and the number of opening and closing <reflection>/</reflection> tags matches.

Reward and advantage hyper-parameters. Wrong-no-reflect penalty parameters n_w=3, ϕ=4 (yielding penalty $-(2/4)^2 = -0.25$); efficiency-factor free budget d_{free}=1 and exponent ϕ=4 (so two reflections give $R_{\text{eff}}=1-(1/4)^2=0.9375$); difficulty-gated floor $A_{\text{floor}}=-0.5$ with per-prompt gate $w_x=\text{clip}(\mu_x^{\text{dir}}, 0, 1)$; asymmetric PPO clip ϵ_{lo}=0.20, ϵ_{hi}=0.26; KL coefficient 0.

C Cold-Start Configuration

Cold-start data construction details. We construct the cold-start corpus from the hard split of Big-Math (Albalak et al., 2025). For each problem, Qwen2.5-Math-1.5B samples one reasoning trajectory at temperature 0.5, which is then verified for correctness. Incorrect trajectories are transformed by a strong API teacher(Deepseek R1) into Clean-Slate Reflection training instances, while correct minimal solutions are retained as direct-solving examples.

For each incorrect solution, the teacher identifies the first faulty step and returns a structured analysis consisting of: (i) `cut_point`, the reasoning prefix before the error; (ii) `verified_states`, the correct intermediate conclusions established so far; (iii) `error_reason`, a one-sentence diagnosis of the mistake; and (iv) `new_direction`, a one-sentence corrected direction.

The structured analysis is converted into the fixed reflection template:

> <reflection> So far I have: {verified_states}. However, {error_reason}. {new_direction} </reflection>

The final corpus contains 7,632 reflective and 2,057 perfect instances, with a 90/10 train/eval split within each type. Perfect samples are mixed into training to preserve direct-solving behaviour and prevent the model from reflecting indiscriminately on easy problems.

LoRA adapter. Both phases fine-tune Qwen2.5-Math-1.5B with a LoRA (Hu et al., 2021) adapter of rank 16, α=32, dropout 0.05, applied to all attention projections and MLP gates. The original tokenizer is retained and `<reflection>`/`</reflection>` are treated as plain text markers, so no embedding resize is required.

Optimisation. Phase 1 trains for three epochs at learning rate 2×10^{-4}, maximum sequence length 2048, cosine schedule, and a 90/10 train/eval split within each record type (random seed 42). Phase 2 starts from the Phase 1 adapter and trains for two epochs at learning rate 5×10^{-5} with the three-way example mixing of Section 3.2 in roughly 64:19:17 ratio (reflection-to-solution : Phase-1 replay : perfect). Both phases use the chat template of the underlying tokenizer.

D RL Hyper-parameters

Optimisation and sampling. Group size G=8, prompt batch size 64, actor learning rate 1×10^{-6}, maximum response length 1024, maximum model length 4096, sampling temperature 1.0, top-p 1.0, asymmetric PPO clip $(\epsilon_{\text{lo}}, \epsilon_{\text{hi}})=(0.20, 0.26)$, KL coefficient 0, maximum two reflection events per trajectory (i.e. at most three generation rounds).

Training stack. We implement REFLECT+ on the `verl` framework (Sheng et al., 2024), which runs rollout (vLLM) and policy update (FSDP) on separate engines, with token-level masking for tokens whose inference- vs. training-engine log-probabilities diverge.

Stability safeguards. For uniform-outcome groups (all G rollouts of a prompt correct or all wrong), we skip the standardisation in Eq. 8 and instead use the unnormalised advantage $R_i - \mu_x^{\text{dir}}$. This avoids amplifying small stochastic reward differences caused by formatting, depth penalties, or sampling variability into unstable normalized gradients.

E Evaluation Configuration

For every benchmark except MMLU-Pro we sample 32 generations per problem at temperature 1.0; MMLU-Pro uses greedy decoding (pass@1). Math benchmarks are scored by an answer-level verifier that supports \boxed and \fbox extraction, set/vector unordered comparison, and symbolic equality through `sympy`; the same verifier is used for the task reward during training. The multiple-choice benchmarks (LogiQA, GPQA, MMLU-Pro) are scored by exact option match.

F Training Dynamics

We track the reflection trigger rate, the per-role reward, the recovery rate, and the regression rate over the course of RL training. Curves are produced by the training-time monitor; the target signature is a selective trigger rate on in-distribution validation rather than all-example reflection, a positive event reward, monotonically improving validation accuracy, and a recovery rate that exceeds the regression rate by a clear margin.

G Reflection Template Example

A typical training example is:

> **Problem:** Find $\sum_{k=1}^{10} k(k+1)$.
> **Error prefix:** "We have $k(k+1) = k^2 - k$, so the sum is $\sum k^2 - \sum k$. . . "
> **Reflection:** <reflection> So far I have: the goal is to evaluate $\sum_{k=1}^{10} k(k+1)$, and the standard identities $\sum k = n(n+1)/2$ and $\sum k^2 = n(n+1)(2n+1)/6$ are available. However, the previous step expanded $k(k+1)$ as $k^2 - k$ instead of $k^2 + k$. Re-expand $k(k+1) = k^2 + k$ and apply the two standard identities. </reflection>
> **Clean-slate continuation:** "$\sum k^2 + \sum k = 385 + 55 = 440$. The answer is $\boxed{440}$."

H Continuation Case Studies

To make the *how-to-continue* effect concrete, we present three representative reflection events drawn from GSM8K (two in-distribution arithmetic cases) and LogiQA (one out-of-distribution case). For each event we hold the reflection r fixed and place the two continuations side by side: the clean-slate continuation conditioned on (x, r), and the context-preserving continuation conditioned on (x, y^-, r). Because r is identical, any difference in the continuation is attributable solely to the presence or absence of the faulty prefix y^-. In all three cases the clean-slate continuation reaches the gold answer while the appended continuation re-anchors on the slip already present in y^- and arrives at a different, incorrect answer.

Case 1 — GSM8K arithmetic (`gsm8k-905`). *Query x:* "Harold sleeps for 10 hours a night, works 2 hours less than he sleeps, and walks his dog for 1 hour each day. How much free time does Harold have left in his day?" Gold answer 5 hours.
Faulty prefix y^-: the model correctly derives "sleep $= 10$, work $= 10 - 2 = 8$, dog $= 1$," but then writes "the total number of hours Harold spends on sleep and walking his dog is $10 + 1 = 11$ hours" – silently *dropping the work hours* from the budget sum.
Reflection r: `<reflection>` So far I have: Harold sleeps 10 h; works $10 - 2 = 8$ h; walks the dog 1 h. However, the model incorrectly assumes work hours are included in the sleep-and-dog-walking total, which is impossible. Sum sleep, work, and dog-walking and subtract from 24 h. `</reflection>`
Clean-slate continuation (x, r): sums all three activities ($10 + 8 + 1 = 19$ h) and reports $24 - 19 = \boxed{5}$ h. The reflection's diagnosis ("work was dropped") is explicitly cashed in.
Appended continuation (x, y^-, r): re-uses the prefix's "$10 + 1 = 11$" line verbatim and reports $24 - 11 = \boxed{13}$ h. The reflection is in context but the visible prefix arithmetic wins.

Case 2 — GSM8K arithmetic (`gsm8k-526`). *Query x:* "Ada uses 12 kWh of electricity per day; a new device consumes 2 kWh per day on top of that. Electricity costs \$1.50 per kWh. What is the difference in her weekly electric bill before vs. after adding the device?" Gold answer \$21.
Faulty prefix y^-: the prefix mis-types the unit as "12 kilowatts *per hour*" and writes "weekly consumption $= 12 \times 24 \times 7 = 2016$ kWh" – double-counting the per-hour factor.
Reflection r: `<reflection>` So far I have: daily consumption 12 kWh; new device 2 kWh/day; combined daily 14 kWh. However, the prefix treats "12 kWh" as a rate per hour and multiplies by 24, while the problem gives a daily total. Use 12 and 14 as daily kWh totals when computing the weekly bill. `</reflection>`
Clean-slate continuation (x, r): treats the 12 and 14 values as daily kWh; difference $= 2$ kWh/day; weekly $= 2 \times 7 = 14$ kWh; bill difference $= 14 \times \$1.50 = \boxed{\$21}$.
Appended continuation (x, y^-, r): keeps the prefix's $\times 24 \times 7$ expansion in scope, writes $2 \times 24 \times 7 \times \$1.50 = \boxed{\$453.60}$. Despite the reflection's explicit rewording of the unit, the prefix's formula is re-applied.

Case 3 — LogiQA (out-of-distribution; `logiqa-7364`). *Query x:* a two-player payoff-matrix question (Zhang vs. Li with payoffs $(A, A) = (3, 3)$, $(A, B) = (0, 5)$, $(B, A) = (5, 0)$, $(B, B) = (2, 2)$) asking which of four statements about the players' best responses is correct. Gold answer B ("when Zhang chooses A, Li will choose B").
Faulty prefix y^-: the model commits to "Answer: C — when Li chooses scheme B, Li will choose scheme B," which is a circular re-statement of the choice rather than a best-response argument, and it pairs the wrong payoffs with the wrong cells.
Reflection r: `<reflection>` So far I have: payoff matrix is correctly identified. However, the previous step contradicts the matrix: Li gets 2 when she chooses B *only* if Zhang also chooses B; the "Li chooses B, so Li chooses B" chain is not a valid best-response. Compute Li's best response by comparing her two payoffs under each of Zhang's choices and identify the dominant strategy. `</reflection>`
Clean-slate continuation (x, r): reconstructs the matrix from (x, r) alone, derives that "if Zhang plays A, Li's payoffs are 3 vs. 5, so Li plays B; if Zhang plays B, Li's payoffs are 0 vs. 2, so Li plays B," concludes that B is Li's dominant strategy, and outputs $\boxed{B}$.
Appended continuation (x, y^-, r): reproduces the matrix correctly but then re-derives the prefix's circular "when Li chooses B, Li chooses B" line and again outputs $\boxed{C}$. Even with the explicit reflection in context, the visible prefix re-anchors the continuation on the same non-argument.

Benchmark	n_{hard}	Recovery (%)
MATH500	350	6.0
GSM8K	329	13.4
AMC23	45	6.7
GPQA	500	9.0
LogiQA	2821	20.3

Table 7: Recovery on *hard* reflection points where the faulty prefix y^- cannot be salvaged by any of four strong continuers (GRPO, Qwen2.5-3B-Instruct, Qwen2.5-7B-Instruct, and Qwen3-8B) continuing from (x, y^-) alone. n_{hard} is the size of this subset on each benchmark; the *Recovery* column reports the fraction recovered by REFLECT+'s own reflect-then-continue policy (reflection drawn from REFLECT+, continuation in clean-slate rebuild).

I Recovery on Hard Reflection Points

To complement the aggregate accuracy in Tables 4 and 5, we isolate the *hard* subset of reflection points: cases where four strong continuers (GRPO, Qwen2.5-3B-Instruct, Qwen2.5-7B-Instruct, Qwen3-8B) all fail to recover the answer when continuing from the error prefix y^- alone. On this hard subset, REFLECT+'s own reflect-then-continue policy still succeeds non-trivially (Table 7): 13.4% on GSM8K and 20.3% on LogiQA, with smaller but non-zero recovery rates on MATH500, AMC23, and GPQA. These cases are by construction unreachable by direct continuation from y^-, so any recovery is attributable to the combined effect of the reflection block and the clean-slate rebuild.