LMCD: Language Models are Zeroshot Cognitive Diagnosis Learners

Anonymous ACL submission

Abstract

Cognitive Diagnosis has become a critical task in AI-empowered education, supporting personalized learning by accurately assessing students' cognitive states. However, traditional cognitive diagnosis models (CDMs) often struggle in cold-start scenarios due to the lack of student-exercise interaction data. Recent NLP-based approaches leveraging pre-trained language models (PLMs) have shown promise by utilizing textual features but fail to fully bridge the gap between semantic understanding and cognitive profiling. In this work, we propose **L**anguage **M**odels as Zeroshot **C**ognitive **D**iagnosis Learners (LMCD), a novel framework designed to handle cold-start challenges by harnessing large language models (LLMs). LMCD operates via two primary phases: (1) Knowledge Diffusion, where LLMs generate enriched contents of exercises and knowledge concepts (KCs), establishing stronger semantic links; and (2) Semantic-Cognitive Fusion, where LLMs employ causal attention mechanisms to integrate textual information and student cognitive states, creating comprehensive profiles for both students and exercises. These representations are efficiently trained with off-the-shelf CDMs. Experiments on two real-world datasets demonstrate that LMCD significantly outperforms state-of-the-art methods in both exercise-cold and domain-cold settings.

1 Introduction

Cognitive Diagnosis Models (CDMs) have become pivotal in educational technology, offering data-driven insights into students' cognitive states across different knowledge concepts (KCs). These models are indispensable for developing personalized learning systems (Huang et al., 2019a; Yu et al., 2024), computerized adaptive testing (Bi et al., 2020) and so on (Huang et al., 2019b). Traditional CDMs such as Item Response Theory (IRT) (Lord, 1952), Multi-dimensional IRT (MIRT) (Reckase, 2006), Deterministic Input Noisy "And" gate model (DINA) (De La Torre, 2009), and Neural Cognitive Diagnosis Model (NCDM) (Wang et al., 2020a) have demonstrated significant success in conventional settings where abundant student-exercise interaction data is available.

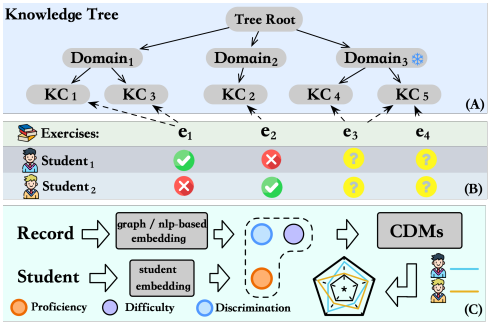

Figure 1: An illustration of the cold-start problem in cognitive diagnosis. (a) is hierarchical KC tree. (b) is sparse student-exercise interaction matrix. (c) is typical cognitive diagnosis framework for addressing cold-start problems.

However, these established approaches face substantial challenges in cold-start scenarios where there is little or no historical interaction data (Wang et al., 2024a). Cold-start refers to scenarios involving either new students or new exercises introduced into the system. Furthermore, new exercises can be classified into two types of cold-start problems based on whether their corresponding domain appears in the training data, as illustrated in Figure 1. Specifically, **exercise cold-start** occurs when the new exercises belong to the same domain as those seen in the training data, whereas **domain cold-start** arises when new exercises originate from entirely unseen domains, posing a more significant challenge.

As shown in Figure 1(c), current approaches addressing these cold-start challenges generally fall into two categories: graph-based methods and NLP-based methods. Graph-based approaches, ex-

emplified by works like ICDM (Liu et al., 2024a) and TechCD (Gao et al., 2023), construct relationships between exercises, KCs, and students to establish connections between unseen and seen entities through graph structures. Although innovative, these methods are limited by the accuracy of KC annotations and the scarcity of high-quality educational knowledge graphs.

NLP-based methods leverage pre-trained language models (PLMs) to encode exercise texts and KC labels. These approaches have shown surprising effectiveness, sometimes achieving competitive or superior results compared to SOTA models, as demonstrated in TechCD (Gao et al., 2023) and ZeroCD (Gao et al., 2024). Their ability to establish connections through semantic similarity makes them particularly promising for cross-domain scenarios. However, these methods face fundamental limitations in fully capturing cognitive complexity. For instance, exercises in NIPS34 (Wang et al., 2020b) with similar wording like *"What is 4 written as a fraction?"* and *"What is a third of a seventh?"* target entirely different KCs despite their textual similarity. Additionally, vague KC labels provide insufficient information for accurate representation through simple encoding. Most critically, these approaches struggle to effectively bridge semantic space with individual students' cognitive states. Even the latest work leveraging large language models (LLMs) (Liu et al., 2024b; Ma et al., 2025a; Liu et al., 2025) has not adequately addressed these limitations.

Furthermore, existing cognitive diagnostic methods predominantly employ absolute difficulty, which conceptualizes the difficulty of an exercise as an inherent and fixed attribute determined by the characteristics of the exercise, modeling it as a constant applicable to all students (Choi and Moon, 2020). Therefore, it presents a severe challenge to the capacity of CDMs for personalized application, and multiple studies have explicitly proposed that exercise difficulty should be dynamically modeled based on individual differences among students (Gan et al., 2020).

Motivated by these challenges, we propose LMCD, a novel framework that leverages LLMs to address exercise cold-start and domain cold-start scenarios—the most prevalent challenges in online education environments. Specifically, the proposed LMCD operates in two primary phases: (1) **Knowledge Diffusion**, where LLMs generate enriched contents of exercises and KCs, creating stronger semantic links; and (2) **Semantic-Cognitive Fusion**, where we combine original exercise text with generated content and student-specific tokens as input to an LLM, using causal attention to create comprehensive representations that fuse semantic space with cognitive states. Finally, we align these representations with conventional CDM parameters, modeling discrimination, and relative difficulty rather than absolute difficulty, enabling more precise prediction of student performance.

The major contributions of our work are as follows:

(1) We pioneer the use of LLMs' causal attention mechanisms to capture dynamic student-exercise interactions, introducing the first explicit modeling of relative difficulty in cognitive diagnosis. (2) We develop a flexible LLM-based framework that seamlessly integrates with off-the-shelf CDMs, enhancing their performance while maintaining their theoretical foundations. (3) Through extensive experiments on two real-world datasets, we demonstrate LMCD's significant performance improvements in both exercise cold-start and domain cold-start scenarios compared to state-of-the-art methods.

2 Preliminary

In this section, we review the definitions of cold-start scenarios in cognitive diagnosis and common computational formulas in CDMs. A complete review of related work is reported in Appendix A.6

Cold-start scenarios. We consider a data scenario where exercises can be divided into two categories: warm exercises($\mathcal{H}$) and cold exercises($\mathcal{C}$), which belong to different KCs. Warm exercises have abundant student response records (with labels), while cold exercises have none. Obviously, CDMs trained on $\mathcal{H}$ perform poorly on $\mathcal{C}$. Therefore, Cold-Start methods emphasize improving such performance without **any labeled data** from cold exercises (or identically distributed data). The division between hot and cold items encompasses two more specific categories: (1) **Exercise cold-start.**: $\mathcal{H}$ and $\mathcal{C}$ are isolated at the exercise level, but some exercises may belong to the same KCs. (2) **Domain cold-start.**: the most stringent scenario where $\mathcal{H}$ and $\mathcal{C}$ have no overlap in knowledge concepts and are completely isolated. Detailed definitions of scenario partitioning and KC structure descriptions are provided in Appendices A.3 and A.2.

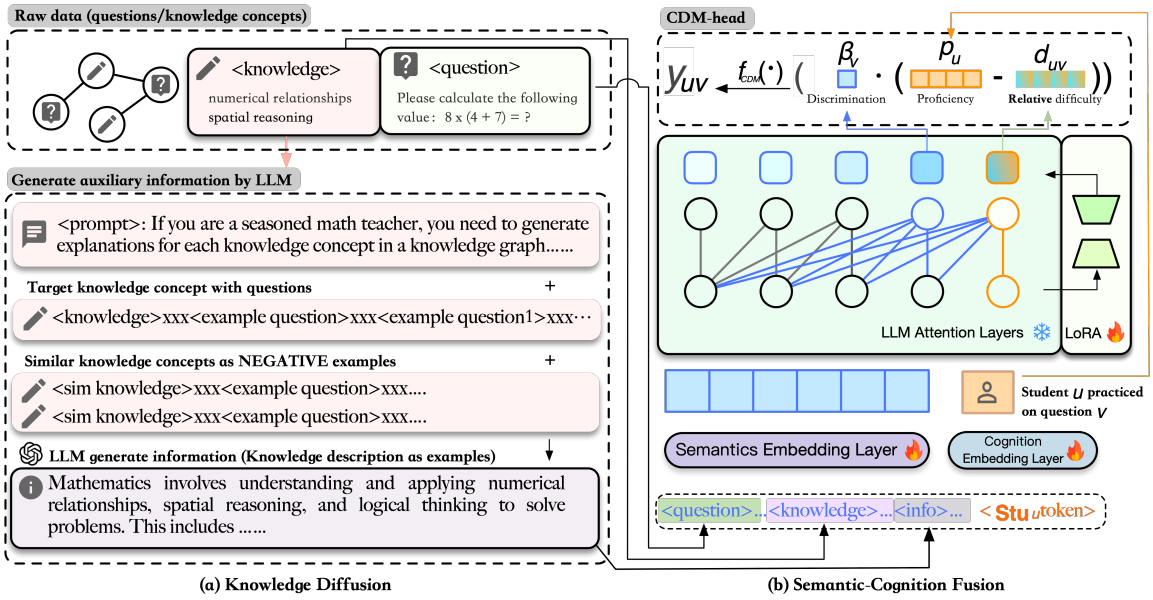

Figure 2: LMCD framework overview. (a) Knowledge Diffusion: LLMs generate enriched contents of exercises and knowledge concepts. (b) Semantic-Cognitive Fusion: Causal attention mechanisms integrate textual information with student-specific cognitive states to model relative difficulty.

Cognitive Diagnosis Models (CDMs). CDMs infer students' proficiency of specific KCs by analyzing their exercise responses. We define this generally as $y_{uv} = \mathcal{M}(u, v)$, where $y_{uv} \in \mathbb{R}^d$ represents student u's performance on exercise v. The interaction equation $\mathcal{M}$ typically follows the form $y_{uv} = \sigma(\beta(\mathbf{p} - \mathbf{d}))$ or $y_{uv} = \sigma(\mathbf{p}^\top \mathbf{d} + \beta)$, where $\mathbf{p} \in \mathbb{R}^d$ represents student u's proficiency, while $\mathbf{d}$ and β denote the exercise v's difficulty and discrimination respectively. The dimension d varies by model: 1 for IRT, the total number of KCs for NCDM, or a fixed value for MIRT.

3 Methodology

3.1 Key Factors in CDMs

Based on the introduction in the previous section, we can abstract the computational formulas of most CDMs into a unified form:

$$y_{uv} = \sigma(m(\mathbf{p}, \mathbf{d})) \tag{1}$$

where $m(\cdot, \cdot)$ is a metric function that measures the relationship between student proficiency representation $\mathbf{p}$ and exercise difficulty representation $\mathbf{d}$ To simplify the problem, we temporarily exclude discrimination β. The function $m(\cdot, \cdot)$ has different definitions across CDMs: in IRT and NCDM, $m(\cdot, \cdot)$ is defined as $\mathbf{p} - \mathbf{d}$, while in mIRT it is defined as $\mathbf{p}^\top \mathbf{d}$. Intuitively, assuming student u correctly answers exercise v, a larger $m(\cdot, \cdot)$ yields a y_{uv} closer to 1 (correct response) after sigmoid transformation. However, in cold-start scenarios, the untrained difficulty representation $\mathbf{d}$ of cold exercise disrupts the metric relationship modeled by $m(\cdot, \cdot)$ when paired with proficiency representations p trained on warm exercise. This misalignment fundamentally explains why CDMs struggle with cold starts.

NLP-based methods serve as strong baselines by alleviating this problem through establishing semantic relationships. The core logic is that if two exercises are semantically similar, their difficulty levels are also similar. Similarly, Graph-based methods aim to establish topological relationships between hot and cold items to find representations for cold item difficulty. However, the difficulty relationships between exercises clearly cannot be "completely equivalent to" semantic or topological relationships, and exercise difficulty varies across individuals. Based on this, the motivation of our method can be briefly described as: (1) expanding the limited textual information of exercises; (2) enabling deeper fusion between student cognitive modality and exercise textual information; (3) establishing dynamic difficulty representations that are "personalized for each individual."

3.2 Knowledge Diffusion

NLP-based CDMs are limited by brief exercise texts and vague KC labels, creating imprecise se-

mantic relationships. Exercises with similar wording often assess different KCs, while generic KC labels provide insufficient information for accurate cold-start diagnosis.

Our approach transforms concise educational texts into detailed, explicit representations through LLM-driven text-to-text generation. This process uncovers implicit knowledge within the original text, facilitating more precise differentiation and linkage across domains. We call this process "Knowledge Diffusion".

This process applies to both exercise texts and KCs. Taking 'KC diffusion' as an example (Figure 2(a)), the procedure involves three steps: (1) extracting exercises Q_{target} associated with each target knowledge concept k_{target}; (2) retrieving semantically similar KCs (K_{neg}) and their corresponding exercises (Q_{neg}) as negative examples; and (3) prompting the LLM to generate enriched descriptions that distinguish the target concept from these related concepts.

$$k'_{\text{target}} = \text{LLM}\left(k_{\text{target}}, Q_{\text{target}}, K_{\text{neg}}, Q_{\text{neg}}\right) \quad (2)$$

Notably, negative examples are crucial for generating discriminative content, unlike other approaches (Liu et al., 2024b) that use only exercises of k_{target}. Comparative examples are provided in the Appendix A.5.

3.3 Semantic-Cognitive Fusion

As shown in Figure 2(b), we primarily focus on modifying the embedding layer of language models to incorporate student cognitive state during forward propagation, while adapting the LLM output representation to various off-the-shelf CDMs. Specifically, given exercise v and student u, we leverage the LLM to generate a personalized feedback representation unique to each student-exercise interaction. We then integrate these representations into the difficulty parameter d of CDM, and that can be considered as incorporating the student's cognitive state, representing a form of relative difficulty.

Student Embedding. We defined a special token stu_u for each student u. and constructed a cognitive representation embedding layer which is specifically used for encoding stu_u to the following cognitive representation of student u:

$$E_u = \text{EMBLayer}_{\text{cog}}(stu_u) \quad (3)$$

Student Feedback. To generate personalized feedback representations, we align student embedding E_u with the LLM's semantic space. This alignment enables the model to generate student-specific feedback for each exercise v. Our approach proceeds as follows: For a given exercise v, we first encode all available textual information (including LLM-generated knowledge concept descriptions) using the LLM's native embedding layer. Specifically:

$$E_v = \text{EMBLayer}_{\text{llm}}(\text{Concat}[k'_{target}, v]) \quad (4)$$

The dimension of E_v is $S \times H$, where S is the length of the entire input text tokens, and H is the hidden size of the LLM. We merge E_u into the last dimension of E_v to get E_{fusion}:

$$E_{\text{fusion}} = \begin{bmatrix} E_v \\ E_u \end{bmatrix} \quad (5)$$

where $E_{\text{fusion}} \in \mathbb{R}^{(S+1)\times H}$. We feed E_{fusion} into the LLM backbone for forward propagation to obtain the final representation O_{fusion}.

$$\begin{aligned} &\mathbf{h}_0 = E_{\text{fusion}} \\ &\mathbf{h}_l = \text{FFN}_l(\text{Attn}_l(\mathbf{h}_{l-1})), \quad l = 1, 2, \ldots, N \\ &O_{\text{fusion}} = \mathbf{h}_l \end{aligned} \quad (6)$$

where Attn and FFN represent the attention layer and feed-forward network structure in the LLM based on the Transformer architecture (Vaswani et al., 2017), respectively, and N is the total number of layers in the LLM. Based on the obtained O_{fusion}, we define the following student feedback representation and exercise representation:

$$O_{\text{feedback}} = O_{\text{fusion}}[:, -1] \in \mathbb{R}^{1\times H} \quad (7)$$

$$O_{\text{v}} = O_{\text{fusion}}[:, -2] \in \mathbb{R}^{1\times H} \quad (8)$$

Leveraging the causal attention mechanism of LLMs, O_{feedback} emerges as the product of interaction between student cognitive state E_u and exercise semantic space E_v. This interaction captures how a specific student processes and responds to a particular exercise's content. Consequently, we define O_{feedback} as the personalized feedback representation for student u on exercise v. In contrast, O_v is derived solely from the exercise's textual information processing, representing the context-independent semantic encoding of exercise v.

Output Projection. Here, we map the obtained representations to different CDMs parameters and define a general form of CDM as follows:

$$y_{uv} = f_{cdm}(\mathbf{p}, \mathbf{d}, \beta) \quad (9)$$

where $f_{cmd}(\cdot)$ represents the interaction function of different CDMs, β is the discrimination parameter, and y_{uv} is the predicted performance result of student u on exercise v. We projectively map the obtained O_{feedback}, E_u and O_v to get $\mathbf{d}$, $\mathbf{p}$, β as follows:

$$\mathbf{d} = \mathbf{d_{uv}} = W_d(O_{\text{feedback}}) \tag{10}$$

$$\mathbf{p} = W_p(E_u) \tag{11}$$

$$\beta = W_v(O_v) \tag{12}$$

We map O_{feedback} to the difficulty and O_v to the discrimination, which are specific parameters of CDMs. To preserve the independence of proficiency parameters ($\mathbf{p}$), we ensure they remain free from exercise-specific information by deriving them solely from student embeddings E_u. The entire framework is optimized end-to-end using cross-entropy loss. We froze the LLM backbone parameters and fine-tuned it with LoRA (Hu et al., 2022). To better enable cognitive state and LLM semantic space fusion, we activate $\text{EMBLayer}_{\text{llm}}$ and $\text{EMBLayer}_{\text{cog}}$ during training.

4 Experimental

In this section, we conduct comprehensive experiments to address the following research questions:

- **RQ1** How powerful is LMCD for the exercise cold-start?
- **RQ2** Can LMCD effectively link different domains?
- **RQ3** How effective are the key components of LMCD?
- **RQ4** Is relative difficulty more reasonable compared to absolute difficulty?

The complete experimental code at this link.

4.1 Experimental Setup

Datasets. We selected two open-source real-world datasets: NIPS34 (Wang et al., 2020b) and XES3G5M (Liu et al., 2023), both with exercise text, KC labels and their structural relationships. We divide them as follows:

Exercise cold-start: We performed a five-fold split on the exercise in the dataset, with each fold divided into training set, oracle set, and test set. To avoid data leakage, we ensured that data appearing in the oracle set and test sets would not appear in the training set.

Domain cold-start: Based on the tree-structured KC hierarchy in the NIPS34 dataset, we partitioned the data into 3 folds using the three largest first-level KCs (Number, Algebra, and Geometry) as separate domains. Given the isolation of records across domains, we conducted three experiments, each selecting one target domain for testing (split into oracle sets and test sets) while using the remaining two domains as training data.

The oracle set verifies the upper bound of model performance in non-cold-start scenarios. Data volumes for Exercise cold-start and Domain cold-start experiments are reported in Table 1. Detailed dataset information is provided in Appendix A.1.

Datasets	Train Logs	Oracle Logs	Test Logs
NIPS34	1105934.0	221434.0	55359.0
XES3G5M	243309.2	48616.8	12154.8
Algerbra	1029309	217552	54388
Geometry	902622	318901	79726
Number	670567	504545	126137

Table 1: Data Distribution in Exercise Cold-start (Five Folds) and Domain Cold-start

Baselines. Here we compared the following 8 methods, applicable to IRT/MIRT/NCDM prediction heads.

- Oracle: In the Oracle approach, training utilizes both the training set and the oracle set, representing the theoretical upper bound on the performance of CDMs in cold-start scenarios.
- Random: The lower bound of prediction skill is measured by sampling from $\text{Uniform}(0, 1)$ as the student's correct response probability.
- TechCD (Gao et al., 2023): TechCD leverages graphical relationships between KCs to link students' practiced and unseen exercises, creating student representations through historical interactions.
- NLP-based: Unlike TechCD, which only uses BERT as a baseline, we further incorporate stronger baselines, including RoBERTa (Liu et al., 2019), BGE (Xiao et al., 2024) and Qwen3-Embedding (Zhang et al., 2025), to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of semantic-based methods, while ensuring fairness in the experimental setup by using the same textual content.
- KCD (Dong et al., 2025): As the current SOTA method, KCD utilizes LLMs for reasoning, transforming textual content and in-

teraction records into prompts to extract information and generate summaries. These summaries are mapped to the behavioral space of CDMs and optimized via contrastive loss.

All the experimental details of the baseline approach can be found in Appendix A.4.

Metrics and Training Settings. We adopt commonly used metrics, namely the Area Under Curve (AUC), the Prediction Accuracy (ACC), and the Root Mean Square Error (RMSE), to validate the effectiveness of the CDMs. Qwen-Plus was utilized to generate descriptions information for KCs, while Qwen2.5-1.5B-base (Yang et al., 2024) serving as the foundation model for our approach. Training was conducted using the DeepSpeed (Rasley et al., 2020) framework, with a maximum of 10 training epochs. The learning rate was set to 0.0001 with a linear scheduler.

4.2 Performance on Exercise Cold-Start (RQ1)

We conducted exercise cold-start experiments on the NIPS34 and XES3G5M datasets, with results summarized in Table 2. The key observations are as follows: (i) Our proposed LMCD consistently outperformed other methods across most experiments. Notably, the NLP-based approach utilizing Qwen3E embeddings achieved the second-best performance in several cases due to its strong semantic representation capabilities. However, LMCD achieves superior performance with only 1.5B parameters compared to Qwen3E's 4B parameters. This highlights the advantage of LMCD's strategy to integrate exercise texts with student cognitive states, which surpasses methods relying solely on textual information. (ii) The graph-based TechCD methods showed limited effectiveness in exercise cold-start scenarios. This stems from TechCD's heavy reliance on topological relationships between KCs, which are sparse in real-world datasets, limiting its practical applicability.

4.3 Performance on Domain Cold-Start (RQ2)

We conducted more challenging cross-domain experiments on the NIPS34 dataset. Due to the sparsity of knowledge embedding in NCDM, which can not be transferred to cross-domain scenarios, we only performed experiments on IRT and MIRT. The specific results are reported in Table 3. We observe that: In domain cold-start scenarios, LMCD achieved nearly optimal results in both Algebra and Geometry experiments, while KCD performed best in the Number domain. KCD works by using LLMs to generate textual summaries of both each student's problem-solving behaviors and each exercise's user-interaction statistics for transfer to CDMs during training. LMCD leverages textual description of KCs while incorporating students' cognitive information into problem representations. By contrast, TechCD failed completely in cross-domain scenarios mainly due to the fact that the cold-start data is isolated from the training set both at the KC and exercise level, and thus no transferable knowledge among domains can be obtained through the graph structure. In summary, experimental results show LMCD demonstrates more robust performance in domain cold-start scenarios.

4.4 Ablation Studies (RQ3)

Impact of knowledge encoding strategies. Figure 3 demonstrates the effectiveness of our "knowledge diffusion" approach across three experimental conditions based on different inputs to Eq.4: **Q** (exercise text only), **KQ** (exercise text with knowledge concept labels), and **DKQ** (adding LLM-generated KC descriptions to KQ). Results show that enriching encoding content generally improves performance across models, with LMCD and Roberta showing consistent gains in AUC. BERT, however, performs worse with KQ than with Q alone, likely due to the ambiguity of KC labels without context. This pattern validates the necessity of our "knowledge diffusion" approach, which provides detailed KC descriptions rather than relying solely on potentially ambiguous concept labels.

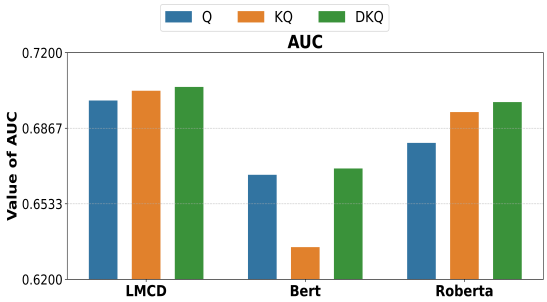

Figure 3: Impact of knowledge encoding strategies.

Impact of CDM parameter representation strategies. We conducted ablation studies on our proposed architecture to validate the effectiveness of the *difficulty* and *discrimination* modeling components. Two LMCD variants were designed: substituting O_{feedback} with O_v in Eq.10, and conversely,

Dataset	Method	IRT			MIRT			NCDM		
		ACC↑	AUC↑	RMSE↓	ACC↑	AUC↑	RMSE↓	ACC↑	AUC↑	RMSE↓
NIPS34	Oracle	0.7074	0.7738	0.4383	0.7076	0.7741	0.4381	0.7068	0.7711	0.4418
	Random	0.4957	0.4907	0.5002	0.4614	0.4947	0.5265	0.5016	0.5016	0.5205
	Bert	0.6575	0.7153	0.4651	0.6638	0.7217	0.4642	0.6653	0.7159	0.4707
	Roberta	0.6576	0.7165	0.4631	0.6631	0.7204	0.4609	0.6630	0.7204	0.4610
	Bge	0.6708	0.7285	0.4581	0.6752	0.7361	0.4581	0.6741	0.7339	0.4598
	Qwen3E	0.6740	0.7317	0.4565	0.6762	0.7336	0.4559	0.6650	0.7257	0.4648
	TechCD	0.5548	0.5560	0.4964	0.5520	0.5554	0.4969	0.5414	0.5575	0.5280
	KCD	0.6504	0.7031	0.4871	0.6146	0.7044	0.4898	0.6607	0.7209	0.5819
	LMCD	**0.6813**	**0.7440**	**0.4525**	**0.6823**	**0.7431**	**0.4527**	**0.6776**	**0.7407**	**0.4545**
XES3G5M	Oracle	0.7793	0.7597	0.3937	0.7782	0.7589	0.3946	0.7644	0.7166	0.4095
	Random	0.4966	0.4998	0.5000	0.4980	0.4989	0.5001	0.4983	0.5068	0.5006
	Bert	0.7528	0.6559	0.4218	0.7583	0.6615	0.4193	0.7220	0.6271	0.4470
	Roberta	0.7578	0.6571	0.4194	**0.7603**	0.6578	0.4182	0.7100	0.6224	0.4622
	Bge	0.7520	0.6593	0.4213	0.7601	0.6710	0.4182	0.7246	0.6261	0.4478
	Qwen3E	0.7506	0.6671	0.4213	0.7510	0.6679	0.4222	0.7415	0.6306	0.4369
	TechCD	0.7509	0.5232	0.4415	0.7509	0.5206	0.4448	0.7501	0.5545	0.4327
	KCD	**0.7584**	0.6430	0.4725	0.7538	0.6542	0.4208	**0.7602**	**0.6741**	**0.4162**
	LMCD	0.7560	**0.6723**	**0.4181**	0.7559	**0.6742**	**0.4174**	0.7436	0.6408	0.4284

Table 2: Performance of Exercise Cold Start on NIPS34 and XES3G5M datasets. The best performance is highlighted in bold, and the the second-best performances is underlined.

CDM	Method	Number as Target			Algerbra as Target			Geometry as Target		
		ACC↑	AUC↑	RMSE↓	ACC↑	AUC↑	RMSE↓	ACC↑	AUC↑	RMSE↓
IRT	Oracle	0.7215	0.7931	0.4278	0.7108	0.7691	0.4379	0.7172	0.7851	0.4329
	Random	0.4932	0.5022	0.5002	0.5019	0.5015	0.5001	0.4864	0.4929	0.5004
	Bert	0.6092	0.6573	0.4903	0.6251	0.6689	0.4800	0.6120	0.6462	0.4863
	Roberta	**0.6369**	0.6824	**0.4720**	0.6483	0.6982	0.4692	0.6224	0.6718	0.4816
	Bge	0.6204	0.6521	0.4957	0.5671	0.6496	0.5531	0.5979	0.6498	0.5145
	Qwen3E	0.6230	0.6766	0.4860	0.6224	0.6848	0.4846	0.6174	0.6638	0.4965
	TechCD	0.4827	0.5151	0.5059	0.4936	0.5071	0.5125	0.4959	0.5046	0.5084
	KCD	0.6357	**0.6945**	0.4880	0.6505	**0.7091**	0.4857	0.6271	0.6726	0.4888
	LMCD	0.6336	0.6837	0.4726	**0.6518**	0.7049	**0.4658**	**0.6363**	**0.6843**	**0.4758**
MIRT	Oracle	0.7223	0.7942	0.4272	0.7116	0.7694	0.4377	0.7180	0.7860	0.4324
	Random	0.4354	0.4938	0.5328	0.5064	0.4951	0.5154	0.4770	0.5010	0.5224
	Bert	0.6339	0.6712	0.4814	0.6318	0.6818	0.4761	0.6212	0.6683	0.4828
	Roberta	0.6195	0.6432	0.5125	0.6524	0.7045	0.4659	0.6096	0.6339	0.5308
	Bge	0.6341	0.6681	0.4842	0.6366	0.6904	0.4819	0.6115	0.6682	0.4879
	Qwen3E	0.6402	0.6808	0.4826	0.6420	0.6884	0.4717	0.6214	0.6658	0.4880
	TechCD	0.5646	0.5267	0.4956	0.4936	0.5153	0.5009	0.5231	0.5014	0.4995
	KCD	**0.6500**	**0.6974**	**0.4715**	0.5922	**0.7120**	0.4992	0.6025	0.6754	0.4994
	LMCD	0.6269	0.6888	0.4778	**0.6551**	0.7082	**0.4656**	**0.6277**	**0.6821**	**0.4783**

Table 3: Performance Comparison of Domain Cold Start with IRT and MIRT on NIPS34. The best performance is highlighted in bold, and the the second-best performances is underlined.

Method	ACC	AUC	RMSE
Eq.10$_{\mathrm{O_{feedback}} \leftarrow \mathrm{O}_v}$	0.6755	0.7387	0.4546
Eq.12$_{\mathrm{O}_v \leftarrow \mathrm{O_{feedback}}}$	0.6792	0.7404	0.4549
LMCD	0.6813	0.7440	0.4525

Table 4: Different strategies to representing $\mathbf{p}$ and β.

Model(LMCD)	ACC	AUC	RMSE
Roberta-0.3b	0.6725	0.7293	0.4579
Qwen2.5-0.5b	0.6808	0.7414	0.4538
Qwen2.5-1.5b	0.6813	0.7440	0.4525
Qwen2.5-3b	0.6842	0.7434	0.4513
Qwen2.5-7b	0.6783	0.7377	0.4538

Table 5: Experimental Results across Different LM Architectures and Model Sizes

replacing O_v with O_{feedback} in Eq.12. We employed IRT-head on the NIPS34 for exercise cold-start. The detailed results are reported in Table 4. The results seem to reveal that optimal performance is achieved when using O_{feedback} to represent *difficulty* and O_v to represent *discrimination*. This finding suggests that difficulty appears to be personalized.

Impact of model architecture. Within the LMCD framework, we analyzed the performance of different model architectures and sizes. As shown in Table 5, we conducted experiments on decoder-based Qwen2.5 models across different sizes and adapted encoder-based RoBERTa models, finding that the decoder-based LMCD framework achieved superior performance compared to the encoder-based variant. This highlights the advantage of causal attention in effectively aggregating semantic information over specific ranges (i.e., exercise-level or exercise-and-student-level), which contributes to the enhanced performance of the LMCD model. Additionally, we assessed models of varying sizes (0.5B to 7B), finding consistent performance improvements from 0.5B to 3B, followed by a slight decline at 7B. This suggests that while larger models offer richer semantic information, they may dilute cognitive features, leading to diminished performance at excessive scales.

4.5 "Difficulty" Analysis (RQ4)

Relative difficulty (Fan, 1998) posits that the difficulty of an exercise depends on the student, reflecting the interaction between the student's knowledge state and the cognitive challenges presented by the exercise. Utilizing LLMs, LMCD introduce relative difficulty via fusion of semantic and cognitive information from exercises, KCs, and students. Here, Figure 4 compares exercise difficulty under different performance of 5 randomly selected students from NIPS34, each having completed over 50 exercises in the cold domain. The top panel displays LMCD-modeled relative difficulty, while the bottom shows BERT-based absolute difficulty. Both models demonstrate that incorrect responses (orange) typically exhibit higher difficulty levels compared to correct responses (blue), which aligns with intuitive expectations. However, LMCD's relative difficulty measure demonstrates significantly better discrimination, with less overlap between correct and incorrect response distributions. This clearer separation indicates that relative difficulty modeling provides a more effective representation for cognitive diagnosis and performance prediction.

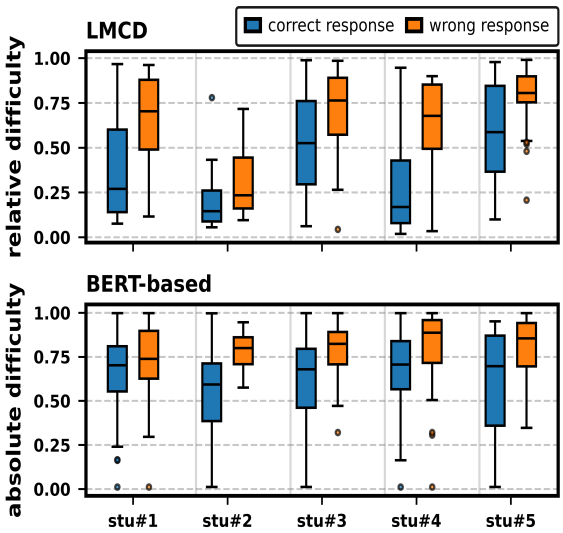

Figure 4: Relative difficulty vs Absolute difficulty.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, we proposed LMCD, a novel framework that harnesses LLMs to address cold-start challenges in cognitive diagnosis. Our approach innovatively leverages knowledge diffusion to establish stronger cross-domain semantic connections and employs causal attention mechanisms to model relative difficulty and student features. Experiments on two real-world datasets confirm that LMCD significantly outperforms state-of-the-art methods in both exercise-cold and domain-cold settings. To our knowledge, this is the first work that takes advantage of the inherent mechanisms of LLM to address cold-start cognitive diagnosis problems, marking a significant advance in the field.

Limitations

Despite significant improvements in exercise cold-start and cross-domain scenarios through our student token approach and causal attention interaction mechanism, our method faces limitations in diagnosing new students. Only students with training data have corresponding embedding representations, restricting new student cold-start applications. A potential workaround involves substituting new students with trained students having similar response patterns, a common approach in this field (Long et al., 2022). Additionally, our LLM-based approach contains substantially more parameters than traditional CD models, making it less suitable for time-sensitive applications. However, we consider this computational cost justified for challenging cold-start scenarios, and expect that smaller, more efficient models will become viable as LLM technology advances.

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A Appendix

A.1 Details about the Datasets

In this research, we selected two real-world online education datasets, XES3G5M and NIPS34, which vary in size and sparsity, to comprehensively evaluate the performance of our proposed method across different practical application scenarios. The statistical information of the datasets is presented in Table 6.

NIPS34: A sub-dataset of the NeurIPS Education Challenge, containing Tasks 3 and 4, is a powerful resource tailored to the advancement of educational data analytics and machine learning applications within the education field. The

dataset comprises crowdsourced diagnostic mathematics exercises collected from the Eedi educational platform between September 2018 and May 2020, targeting students from elementary through high school. Task 3 aims to accurately predict which exercises are of high quality, while Task 4 seeks to determine a personalized sequence of exercises for each student that optimally predicts their responses. NIPS34 contains a variety of features including interaction logs, the content of the exercises in picture format, the names of the KCs and their structured annotations, which allow for a comprehensive analysis of learning behaviors and outcomes. NIPS34 contains more than 1,300,000 records, providing a wealth of high-quality data suitable for multiple types of tasks, making it an invaluable tool for conducting cognitive diagnosis research.

XES3G5M: XES3G5M is a large-scale dataset comprising over five million interactions collected from more than 18,000 third-grade students responding to approximately 8,000 math exercises. It includes extensive auxiliary information related to the exercises and their associated KCs. Sourced from a real-world online mathematics learning platform, XES3G5M not only encompasses the largest number of KCs within the mathematics domain but also provides the most comprehensive contextual information. This includes hierarchical KC relationships, exercise types, Chinese textual content and analyses, as well as timestamps of student responses. In this experiment, we use five-fold cross validation to ensure the reliability of the experimental results. We use the full data set of NIPS34. As for the XES dataset, due to the fact that there are too many record exercises, has done the following treatment, and only 2000 students' corresponding records of doing the exercises are kept in each fold.

	XES3G5M	NIPS34
#Student	11,453	4,918
#Exercise	7,652	948
#KC	1,175	86
#Log	5,139,044	1,382,727
#Log per student	448.7	281.2
#Log per exercise	671.6	1,458.6
#Sparsity(%)	5.1	29.7

Table 6: Statistics of datasets.

A.2 Knowledge Structure of the Datasets

In practical educational scenarios, KCs are typically organized into hierarchical tree structures, as illustrated in Figure 5. In a top-down manner, the root node $\mathcal{K}^0 = \langle \mathbb{K}, \mathcal{R} \rangle = \bigcup_{i=1}^{M^1} \mathcal{D}_i$ represents full dataset or its knowledge system (e.g., "Math" in NIPS34), consisting of the complete KC set $\mathbb{K}$ and the branch set $\mathcal{R}$. Assuming there are a total of M_0^1 nodes at depth 1, each of them is considered a distinct domain $\mathcal{D}_i = \langle \mathbb{K}_i^1, \mathcal{R}_i^1 \rangle$, $\forall i \in [1, M_0^1]$, where $\mathbb{K}_i^1 = \{k_{ij}^l \,|\, j \in [1, 2, ..., M_i^l],\ l \in [1, 2, ..., max_depth]\}$, and $\mathcal{R}_i^1 = \{(k_{ip},\, k_{iq}) \,|\, k_{ip},\, k_{iq} \in \mathbb{K}_i^1\}$, $(k_{ip},\, k_{iq})$ is a directed edge of the tree. Note that knowledge across different domains is entirely isolated, that is, $\mathbb{K}_i^1 \cap \mathbb{K}_j^1 = \emptyset$, $\forall i \neq j$. The hierarchical relationship(s) from the root to the leaf node(s) representing fine-grained terminal KCs associated with exercise v, is called its "knowledge route" $\mathcal{K}_v$.

A.3 The definition of the Cold Start problem

Zero-Shot setting. Consistent with previous studies on cognitive diagnosis, Zero-Shot means that the dataset is divided into two isolated parts in a certain dimension for model training and testing, respectively. Here, our proposed LMCD focuses primarily on exercise and domain-level tasks.

Exercise cold-start. As a classic challenge in CDMs, exercise cold-start refers to the situation in which a new exercise is first introduced into the exercise pool, and due to the absence of historical student response data, it becomes difficult to accurately estimate the exercise's diagnostic properties. Following TechCD (Gao et al., 2023), we randomly divide dataset into warm ($\mathcal{H}$) and cold ($\mathcal{C}$) subsets on exercise-level. In $\mathcal{H}$, there are students $\mathcal{U}_\mathcal{H} = \{u_1, u_2, \cdots, u_{|\mathcal{U}_\mathcal{H}|}\}$, exercises $\mathcal{V}_\mathcal{H} = \{v_1, v_2, \cdots, v_{|\mathcal{V}_\mathcal{H}|}\}$, KCs $\mathcal{K}_\mathcal{H} = \{k_1, k_2, \cdots, k_{|\mathcal{K}_\mathcal{H}|}\}$, and response logs $\mathcal{R}_\mathcal{H} = \{(u, v, \mathcal{K}_v, y_{uv}) \mid u \in \mathcal{U}_\mathcal{H}, v \in \mathcal{V}_\mathcal{H}\}$ where $y_{uv} \in \{0, 1\}$ indicates the correctness of student u on exercise v. Similarly, we define $\mathcal{U}_\mathcal{C}$, $\mathcal{V}_\mathcal{C}$, $\mathcal{K}_\mathcal{C}$, and $\mathcal{R}_\mathcal{C} = \{(u, v, \mathcal{K}_v, y_{uv}) \mid u \in \mathcal{U}_\mathcal{C}, v \in \mathcal{V}_\mathcal{C}\}$ for $\mathcal{C}$. Note that the KCs overlap ($\mathcal{K}_\mathcal{H} \cap \mathcal{K}_\mathcal{C} \neq \emptyset$) while the exercise sets are completely disjoint ($\mathcal{V}_\mathcal{H} \cap \mathcal{V}_\mathcal{C} = \emptyset$). In other words, $\mathcal{H}$ and $\mathcal{C}$ share knowledge indirectly through domain-level.

Domain cold-start. Equivalent to the domain-level zero-shot cognitive diagnosis (DZCD) from ZeroCD (Gao et al., 2024), in a more constrained way than exercise cold-start, we divide $\mathcal{K}^0$ at depth

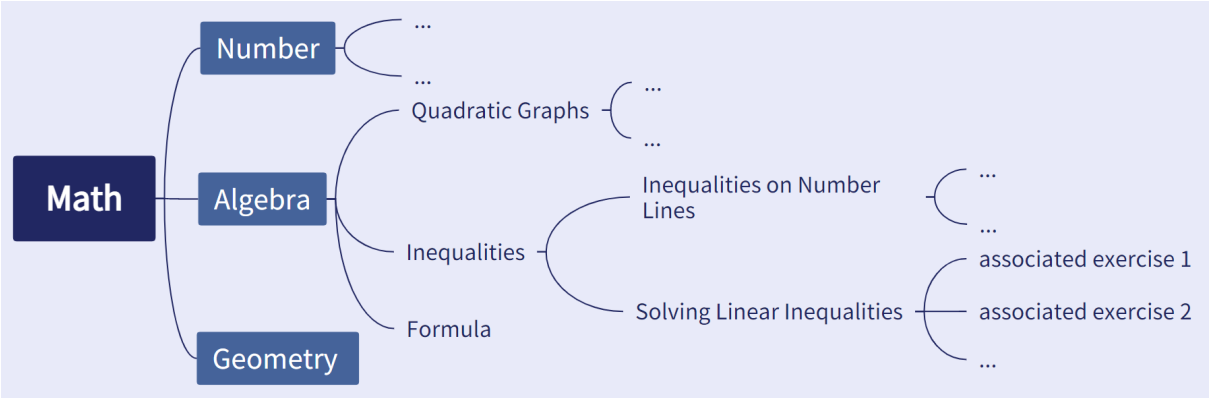

Figure 5: The schematic diagram of the hierarchical structure of knowledge concepts in the NIPS34 dataset.

1 into warm domain(s) $\mathcal{H}$ and cold domain(s) $\mathcal{C}$. The corresponding KC sets $\mathcal{K}_{\mathcal{H}} = \bigcup_{i=1}^{M_{\mathcal{H}}} \mathcal{K}_i^1$ and $\mathcal{K}_{\mathcal{C}} = \bigcup_{i=M_{\mathcal{H}}}^{M} \mathcal{K}_i^1$ satisfy $\mathcal{K}_{\mathcal{H}} \cap \mathcal{K}_{\mathcal{C}} = \emptyset$, $\mathcal{V}_{\mathcal{H}} \cap \mathcal{V}_{\mathcal{C}} = \emptyset$, and $\mathcal{U}_{\mathcal{C}} \subseteq \mathcal{U}_{\mathcal{H}}$, meaning that $\mathcal{H}$ and $\mathcal{C}$ are isolated at both exercise and domain levels.

A.4 Details about Baselines

In this subsection, we provide a detailed explanation of the specific modifications made to each baseline experiment based on its original implementation to adapt it to the data split used in the specific cold-start scenario of this research:

IRT/MIRT: We adopt a three-parameter logistic (3PL) form for the interaction function. The temperature coefficient is maintained at its original setting of 1.703, and the feature dimension of MIRT is set to 4. Meanwhile, considering the specific types of the exercises, we set the upper bound of the guess coefficient to 0.5. In addition, Xavier initialization is applied to all embedding layers in the models.

NeuralCD: We employ the default settings without any modifications to ensure the consistency of the experiment results.

TechCD: The model architecture remains consistent with the original setup, with the addition of optional IRT and MIRT predict heads. Furthermore, undirected edges characterizing the similarity between fine-grained ($depth \geq 3$) KCs under the same parent node are also introduced in the construction of the Knowledge Concept Graph (KCG) for the NIPS34 and XES3G5M datasets, based on the provided KC tree structure.

NLP-base: We employ language models with frozen weights to embed the textual information of students and exercises, including descriptions generated by LLMs, thereby replacing the ID embedding layers in IRT/MIRT and NCDM. Experiments are conducted using BERT, RoBERTa, BGE and Qwen3-Embedding as text embedders. Specifically, we use bert-base-uncased/chinese, bge-large-en/zh-v1.5, xlm-roberta-base and Qwen/Qwen3-Embedding-4B for adaptation to datasets in different languages.

KCD: We use Qwen-Plus for information extraction and diagnosis and modify the prompts as follows. First, input interactions are truncated up to 20 to avoid excessively long prompts, while contents related to interactions are removed from the prompts that generate descriptions for cold-start data. Then, the text embedder employed is bge-large-en/zh-v1.5, and a Chinese version of the prompt was added for the XES3G5M dataset.

A.5 Details about Knowledge Diffusion

In order to generate descriptions for each KC, we utilize the exact format of prompt as follows:

Prompt for KC Description Generation

System Prompt: "If you are a seasoned math teacher, you need to generate explanations for each knowledge concept in a knowledge graph. I will provide you with the name of the knowledge concept and corresponding example problems, as well as names and example problems of distractor knowledge concepts that are not equivalent to it. Please carefully compare them and generate a core explanation for each knowledge concept."

KC Name: k_{target}
Example exercises for k_{target}:
Q_{target}

Distractor KCs
KC Name: k^1_{neg}
Example exercises for k^1_{neg}:
Q^1_{neg}
...
KC Name: k^n_{neg}
Example exercises for k^N_{neg}:
Q^N_{neg}

Enrichment and robustness. As shown in Case 1, when describing the KC "Fractions, Decimals and Percentage Equivalence", the inclusion of distractors effectively prevents the LLM from mechanically enumerating definitions based solely on the target KC's name. Furthermore, it avoids an excessive focus on the content of example exercises leading to redundant information. In summary, the inclusion of distractors not only enriches the prompt but also enhances the robustness of the generated results by mitigating sensitivity to the selection of specific example exercises.

Abstraction and discrimination. Besides, as shown in Case 2, which describe the KC "Angles", the incorporation of distractors results in more concise descriptions which predominantly emphasize the knowledge and skill elements rather than specific examples. In other words, distractor KCs facilitate the abstraction of concrete exercises, thereby accentuating the differences between similar KCs at knowledge and skill level. This abstraction contributes to higher precision and discrimination of the generated descriptions.

KC Descriptions: Case 1

Target KC: **Fractions, Decimals and Percentage Equivalence**

With distractor KCs:
"Fractions involve understanding parts of a whole and performing mathematical operations such as addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division using fractional numbers. This includes interpreting fractions visually and solving problems that require manipulation of fractions in equations or patterns."

Without distractor KCs:
"Fractions represent parts of a whole and are written as a numerator over a denominator. The numerator indicates how many parts are being considered, while the denominator shows the total number of equal parts the whole is divided into. Operations with fractions follow specific rules:
1. **Multiplication**: Multiply the numerators and denominators separately, then simplify if necessary.
- Example: $\frac{1}{3} \times (-9) = \frac{-9}{3} = -3$.
2. **Division**: ..."

KC Descriptions: Case 2

Target KC: **Angles**

With distractor KCs:
"Angles are geometric measures that represent the amount of turn between two intersecting lines or line segments. They can be measured in degrees, estimated visually, compared in size, or determined using tools like protractors. Understanding angles involves recognizing different types (acute, obtuse, right, etc.) and performing operations such as addition, subtraction, or fraction-based calculations involving turns."

Without distractor KCs:
"An **Angle** is a measure of rotation or the amount of turn between two intersecting lines or rays. Angles are typically measured in degrees ($^\circ$), with a full turn equaling 360°. A half-turn corresponds to 180°, and a quarter-turn equals 90°, which is also called a right angle. Angles can be classified based on their size:
Acute angles are less than 90°.
Right angles are ...
To estimate or measure angles, tools such as protractors are used. Estimation involves comparing the given angle to known reference angles (e.g., 90°, 180°). In cases where direct measurement is not possible, logical reasoning or comparison may help determine relationships between angles."

A.6 Related Work

Cognitive Diagnosis. Cognitive diagnosis in education has evolved from traditional psychometric approaches to deep learning models. Early methods like IRT (Lord, 1952) and MIRT (Reckase, 2006) model student-exercise interactions through logistic functions, while DINA (De La Torre, 2009)

introduce slip and guess parameters. These foundational approaches offered interpretability but limited expressiveness. NCDM (Wang et al., 2020a) mark a significant advancement by leveraging neural networks to capture more complex knowledge representations. Recent research has expanded the modeling scope by incorporating additional factors such as emotional states (Wang et al., 2024b), unlabeled data (Chen et al., 2023), and response time (Ma et al., 2025b). Despite advances, most methods struggle in cold-start scenarios with limited data.

Cold-start in Cognitive Diagnosis. Solutions primarily fall into two categories, graph-based and NLP-based approaches. Graph-based methods (Liu et al., 2024a; Gao et al., 2023, 2024) leverage structural relationships between educational entities. TechCD (Gao et al., 2023) leverage tailored knowledge concept graphs linking different domains but requires overlapping students. ZeroCD (Gao et al., 2024) utilizes early bird students in target domains to learn transferable cognitive signals, though this requirement limits practical application. NLP-based approaches show promising results by utilizing language models like BERT to encode exercise text (Gao et al., 2023, 2024), but face limits such as oversimplifying exercise difficulty and misreading unclear texts, leading to inaccuracies in cross-domain settings.

LLMs in Cognitive Diagnosis. LLMs have revolutionized natural language processing with advanced comprehension (Brown et al., 2020) and reasoning capabilities (Kojima et al., 2022; Ma et al., 2025c), but their integration with cognitive diagnosis remains nascent. Current approaches include LRCD (Liu et al., 2025), which embeds students, exercises, and concepts into a unified language space; and KCD (Dong et al., 2025), which exploits LLMs' reasoning ability to generate diagnostic information for students and exercises. However, these approaches' simplistic use of LLMs limits their effectiveness in cold-start scenarios.