Double-Checker: Large Language Model as a Checker for Few-shot Named Entity Recognition

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Abstract

Recently, few-shot Named Entity Recognition (NER) has attracted significant attention due to the high cost of obtaining high-quality labeled data. Decomposition-based methods have demonstrated remarkable performance on this task, which initially train a type-independent span detector and subsequently classify the detected spans based on their types. However, this framework has an evident drawback as a domain-agnostic detector cannot ensure the identification of only those entity spans that are specific to the target domain. To address this issue, we propose Double-Checker, which leverages collaboration between Large Language Models (LLMs) and small models. Specifically, we employ LLMs to verify candidate spans predicted by the small model and eliminate any spans that fall outside the scope of the target domain. Extensive experiments validate the effectiveness of our method, consistently yielding improvements over two baseline approaches.

1 Introduction

In recent years, few-shot Named Entity Recognition (NER) has attracted significant attention due to the high cost of obtaining high-quality labeled data (Ma et al., 2022a; Agrawal et al., 2022). This task mainly focuses on enabling the model to learn from a resource-rich source domain dataset, and further requires the model to predict unseen entity types in a resource-scarce target domain based on a small amount of data, i.e., the support data (Ma et al., 2022a; Das et al., 2022).

To solve the above problem, a common approach is to decompose the task into entity span detection and entity type classification (Chen et al., 2023; Li et al., 2023). Specifically, a type-independent entity span detector is first trained, and then the type classification is performed according to the detection spans. Since the span detector trained in the first stage does not need to focus on specific entity types, it can effectively reduce the distribution gap between the source domain and the target domain, and has excellent performance (Wang et al., 2022; Ma et al., 2022b). However, this paradigm has an obvious drawback: a domain-agnostic detector cannot guarantee that the entity span identified is specific to the target domain, and it will obviously identify many non-target domain candidates [1].

Fortunately, Large Language Models (LLMs) have shown remarkable performance on various natural language processing tasks, such as text generation (Zhang et al., 2023b; Hsieh et al., 2023) and machine translation (Zhu et al., 2023; Moslem et al., 2023). However, some recent studies point out that LLMs are not ideal for NER directly (Han et al., 2023; Xie et al., 2023), and often need to decompose the task into multiple steps or continue to fine-tune on large-scale data (Wei et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2023). These methods will undoubtedly consume a lot of resources.

Therefore, in this paper, we propose to leverage the collaboration of Small Language Models (SLMs) and LLMs to exploit their respective advantages: low resource consumption of SLMs and the extensive knowledge base of LLMs. We aim to address the non-target domain entity span problem inherent in SLMs while mitigating the high resource consumption of LLMs. Along these lines, we propose Double-Checker, a framework where the LLM functions as a checker. Instead of re-identifying entities, the LLM rechecks the candidates identified by the small model, ensuring more accurate and domain-specific entity recognition. Specifically, we first obtain the candidates predicted by the SLM on the target domain sentences. To balance performance and resource consumption, we then utilize a type-adaptive selector to identify which candidates need to be rechecked. Finally, we use the LLM to conduct a two-stage check of the selected

[1] In Appendix A.1, we conduct a related experiment.

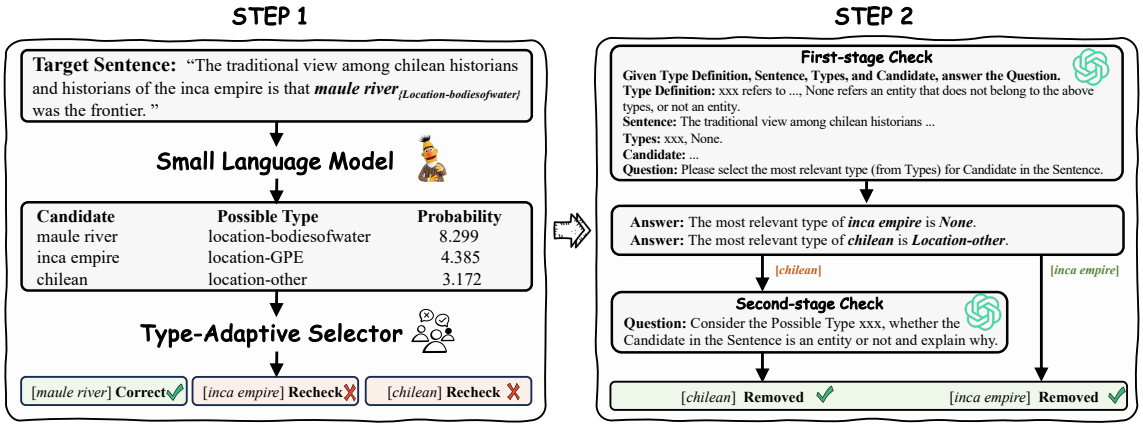

Figure 1: The overall framework of Double-Checker.

candidates, removing incorrectly identified spans to obtain the final results. We conduct extensive experiments on the standard few-shot NER dataset, Few-NERD, achieving consistent performance improvements with the LLM on two state-of-the-art (SOTA) SLMs.

2 Methodology

In this section, we introduce Double-Checker, an efficient framework specifically designed for eliminating non-target domain candidates by rechecking the predictions made by small models. The framework consists of two main steps: firstly, we obtain the candidates predicted by the small model and select the ones to be rechecked; subsequently, a two-stage check utilizing LLM is conducted. An overview of the framework is shown in Figure 1.

2.1 Step 1: Select the Candidates

For each sentence x_i in the target domain, we first leverage the small model to obtain the structural output, denoted as $y_i = [s_i, t_i, p_i]$. Here, s_i represents a candidate span, t_i indicates the corresponding type, and p_i is the probability values.

Intuitively, outputs with higher predicted probability values are less likely to be incorrect. However, considering the high computational cost of using LLM, it is crucial to balance performance and cost by selecting an appropriate subset of data for the LLM to process. We assume that the probability distribution varies across different entity types and that prediction values for different types have varying levels of importance. Therefore, we develop a type-adaptive selector that prioritizes samples for LLM check based on the type-specific probability distributions, ensuring the most critical data is checked within the same data proportion. Specifically, we first construct a collection of probability values for each type:

$$Set(t_i) = Set(t_i) \cup (p_j \times \mathbb{I}(t_j = t_i))_{j=1,\ldots,n}, \quad (1)$$

where n is the number of candidates, and $\mathbb{I}(\cdot)$ denotes the indicator function. Next, we set a quantile point α, which we assume to be 60%. If the probability value of a candidate exceeds the 60th percentile of the samples within its corresponding type set, it is considered less likely to be incorrect. Otherwise, it proceeds to the second step for further verification. By implementing this process, we effectively select the desired candidates.

2.2 Step 2: Two-stage Check

In this step, we utilize the rich external knowledge of the LLM to perform a two-stage check of the selected candidates.

Prompt Construction. Following Zhang et al. (2023a), we transform the task into a QA format comprising five components: *Type Definition*, *Sentence*, *Types*, *Candidate*, and *Question*. Detailed specifications of this format are provided in Appendix A.3. It is important to highlight the introduction of *Type Definition* and the selection scope of *Types*, which we will cover later.

One crucial reason for introducing the concept of *Type Definition* is the variability in the range of entity types across different datasets, which poses a challenge for LLMs that are not inherently aware of this variability. By incorporating a type-specific description, we can enhance the LLM's focus and performance on a given dataset. To achieve this, we input the entire set of types from the Few-NERD dataset into the LLM simultaneously. This approach allows the LLM to consider the complete

Models	Intra					Inter				
	1∼2 shot		5∼10 shot		Avg.	1∼2 shot		5∼10 shot		Avg.
	5 way	10 way	5 way	10 way		5 way	10 way	5 way	10 way	
Full Test set										
ProtoBERT* (Fritzler et al., 2019)	20.76±0.84	15.05±0.44	42.54±0.94	35.40±0.13	28.44	38.83±1.49	32.45±0.79	58.79±0.44	52.92±0.37	45.75
NNshot* (Yang and Katiyar, 2020)	25.78±0.91	18.27±0.41	36.18±0.79	27.38±0.53	26.90	47.24±1.00	38.87±0.21	55.64±0.63	49.57±2.73	47.83
StructShot* (Yang and Katiyar, 2020)	30.21±0.90	21.03±1.13	38.00±1.29	26.42±0.60	28.92	51.88±0.69	43.34±0.10	57.32±0.63	49.57±3.08	50.53
CONTaiNER* (Das et al., 2022)	41.51±0.07	36.62±0.04	57.83±0.01	51.04±0.24	46.75	50.92±0.29	47.02±0.24	63.35±0.07	60.14±0.16	55.36
ESD* (Wang et al., 2022)	36.08±1.60	30.00±0.70	52.14±1.50	42.15±2.60	40.09	59.29±1.25	52.16±0.79	69.06±0.80	64.00±0.43	61.13
DecomposedMeta* (Ma et al., 2022b)	49.48±0.85	42.84±0.46	62.92±0.57	57.31±0.25	53.14	64.75±0.35	58.65±0.43	71.49±0.47	68.11±0.05	65.75
HEProto* (Chen et al., 2023)	53.03±0.30	46.45±0.21	65.70±0.21	58.98±0.22	56.04	66.40±0.18	60.91±0.20	72.53±0.11	68.92±0.20	67.19
HEProto†	52.64	46.26	65.58	58.93	55.85	66.01	60.92	72.29	68.86	67.02
TadNER* (Li et al., 2023)	60.78±0.32	55.44±0.08	67.94±0.17	60.87±0.22	61.26	64.83±0.14	64.06±0.19	72.12±0.12	69.94±0.15	67.74
TadNER†	59.72	55.15	67.60	60.68	60.79	64.57	62.80	71.82	69.32	67.13
Sampled Test set										
GPT-3.5-turbo	53.69	47.07	54.59	49.36	51.18	46.26	42.68	51.81	49.09	47.46
HEProto†	52.94	46.55	65.35	58.90	55.94	65.42	60.89	72.10	69.28	66.92
TadNER†	60.13	55.02	67.62	60.75	60.88	64.38	62.92	71.67	69.54	67.12
Double-Checker$_{-HEProto}$	59.98	54.74	69.00	62.61	61.58	**68.58**	65.76	**73.49**	71.29	**69.78**
Double-Checker$_{-TadNER}$	**64.43**	**60.11**	**70.14**	**64.63**	**64.74**	66.09	**65.81**	73.03	**71.50**	69.11
Δ Double-Checker vs. HEProto	7.04 ↑	8.19 ↑	3.65 ↑	3.71 ↑	5.64 ↑	3.16 ↑	4.87 ↑	1.39 ↑	2.01 ↑	2.86 ↑
Δ Double-Checker vs. TadNER	4.13 ↑	5.09 ↑	2.52 ↑	3.88 ↑	3.86 ↑	1.71 ↑	2.89 ↑	1.36 ↑	1.96 ↑	1.99 ↑

Table 1: Comparison of performance on Few-NERD with the Micro-F1 metric(%). † indicates that the results are from our re-implementation with the same seed. ∗ denotes the results are obtained from Chen et al. (2023) and Li et al. (2023). The best results are in **bold**.

spectrum of entity types and generate tailored descriptions for each specific domain type. In Appendix A.4, we show the full description of the target domain types obtained from GPT-3.5-turbo.

We then define the scope of *Types*. Unlike reranking methods (Ma et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2024) that focus on calibrating false entity types, our approach aims to exclude non-target domain spans or non-entities. Consequently, in most scenarios, it suffices to include only the highest predicted type and "None" (indicating a non-target domain entity or non-entity) within type scope. In certain cases, we also incorporate the second most likely type predicted by the small model to enhance overall performance. In Section 3.3.2, we delve into the impact of varying the types scope on performance.

Two-stage Check Workflow. The right part of Figure 1 illustrates the workflow. For each selected candidate, we obtain the corresponding *Type Definition* based on its predicted type and input it into the LLM along with other necessary information from the prompt to obtain recheck results. If a candidate is determined as "None", it is removed and the process ends; otherwise, we proceed to the second stage of checking. The check in the second stage serves solely to determine whether the candidate is an entity. Based on the context in previous stage, we directly input the new *Question*. If the candidate is deemed as an entity, it will be included in the final result; otherwise, it will be excluded. Through the above process, we remove the false entity span and combine the unselected candidates to constitute the final result.

3 Experiments

3.1 Main Results

Considering the high cost of LLM, we sample the first 10,000 sentences in each sub-setting on the full test set, and reproduce a portion of baselines with the same seed for a fair comparison. Table 1 shows the main results of the comparison between our proposed Double-Checker and baselines. It is evident that Double-Checker achieves consistent improvements over both SLMs. Specifically, there is a minimum increase of 1.39% and a maximum increase of 8.19% on HEProto, while it ranges from 1.36% to 5.09% on TadNER respectively. Furthermore, based on the average performance comparison, we observe that the improvement is more pronounced in the Intra setting due to a wider distribution gap between source and target domains where external knowledge provided by LLM effectively is better to bridges this. It is worth noting that GPT-3.5-turbo alone does not yield satisfactory results and even exhibits significant disparities compared to SOTA methods in most cases; however, when combined as part of Double-Checker, it not only consumes fewer resources but also achieves superior performance compared to both individual models.

Methods	Intra					Inter				
	1∼2 shot		5∼10 shot		Avg.	1∼2 shot		5∼10 shot		Avg.
	5 way	10 way	5 way	10 way		5 way	10 way	5 way	10 way	
Double-Checker$_{-TadNER}$	**64.43**	**60.11**	**70.14**	**64.63**	**64.74**	**66.09**	**65.81**	**73.03**	**71.50**	**69.11**
w/o Two-stage Check	63.67	59.41	69.60	63.97	64.16	65.01	65.05	72.07	70.91	68.26
w/o Type Definition	62.92	58.76	68.66	62.86	63.30	65.60	65.57	72.60	70.53	68.58
w/o Recheck	60.13	55.02	67.62	60.75	60.88	64.38	62.92	71.67	69.54	67.12

Table 2: Ablation study on Few-NERD with the Micro-F1 metric(%).

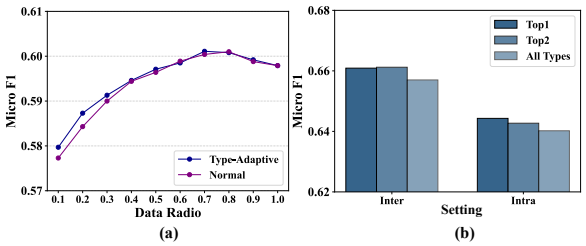

Figure 2: (a) Results of different selecting strategy. (b) Results of different types scope in prompt.

3.2 Ablation Study

As shown in Table 2, we choose TadNER as SLM to conduct ablation experiments to investigate the impact of different compositions on Double-Checker. The removal of two-stage checks resulted in a decline in model performance, which validates the effectiveness of secondary reprocessing results. When type definition are absent, Double-Checker drops more in Intra, indicating that enabling LLM to comprehend label ranges for more challenging tasks can better activate their internal knowledge.

3.3 Comparative Analysis

In this section, we conduct additional experiments to explore the following practical questions:
Q1: Why do we need type-adaptive selector?
Q2: How to adjust types scope in prompt?

3.3.1 Impact of Selector

We compare the performance of ours type-adaptive selector and normal selector (that is, selecting candidates based on all types) on Intra 10-way 1-shot. The Figure 2 (a) clearly demonstrates that our adaptive selector consistently outperforms in most cases, particularly when the proportion of selected data is low, thereby highlighting this phenomenon more prominently. Moreover, our method excels at selecting a greater number of non-target domain candidates with an equivalent data proportion. Additionally, it is worth noting that model performance does not always exhibit a linear relationship with the proportion of data; instead, it reaches a plateau and even declines. Consequently, considering both performance and resource consumption factors, the selector we have designed proves to be more suitable for realistic scenarios while achieving superior performance within limited resources.

3.3.2 Impact of Types Scope

The Figure 2 (b) illustrates a comparison of the impact of different types of scopes in prompt for 5-way 1-shot setting. It is evident that employing the full-type prompt yields the poorest results in both settings, whereas the other two options exhibit no significant differences. This can be attributed to a higher occurrence of errors in predicting non-target domain spans rather than type errors within the few-shot NER scenario. When providing a larger selection of types as input prompts to the large model, it inevitably introduces disturbances and shifts its objective from removing non-target domain spans to reclassifying spans, resulting in performance degradation. Therefore, for practical applications, it is advisable to limit the range of types provided as input prompts to minimize inference costs while potentially improving performance.

4 Conclusion

In this paper, we presented Double-Checker, a framework that effectively combines LLM and SLM for few-shot NER task. Specifically, we initially employed a type-adaptive selector to choose candidates predicted by the small model. Subsequently, the LLM is utilized to conduct a two-stage check process on these selected candidates, removing entity spans and non-entities that are not relevant to the target domain. Extensive experiments conducted using two different small models consistently demonstrated significant improvements, thereby showcasing the efficacy of our approach.

5 Limitations

Our approach aims to combine the complementary strengths of LLM and small models to enhance overall performance. Due to resource constraints, we are unable to run the LLM experiments on the entire test dataset (e.g., the Intra 10 way 5 shot setting includes over 300,000 sentences). Therefore, we sample 10,000 sentences for each setting. Another limitation is that we did not conduct experiments on domain-specific datasets, such as NER datasets in the biomedical field. Generally, more non-domain-specific entity spans are identified in these datasets (Labrak et al., 2024), which we believe are better suited to our framework. We plan to address these limitations in a follow-up study.

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A Appendix

A.1 Interference from the Source Domain

The domain-agnostic detector is affected by the source domain. In order to demonstrate this phenomenon, we re-constructed the target domain (test set) of Few-NERD (Ding et al., 2021) by "entity attacks". Specifically, we first collect entity sets from the source domain (train set) and other domain (dev set). Then, we randomly select a non-entity position in the target domain sentence and insert entities from the two domains separately, thus constructing two interference datasets for entity attacks from different domains. As shown in the Figure 3, we can observe that all the models have a huge drop in performance on two interference datasets. Notice that the BERT-based models have proportionally more performance degradation compared to the GPT-3.5 (OpenAI, 2023) and are subject to more interference from source domain attacks. We attribute this to the fact that the BERT-based model needs to absorb the knowledge of the source domain during the training process, and the span detector fine-tuned on the target domain cannot completely get rid of the influence of the source domain knowledge, leading to easier detection of entity spans in the non-target domain. Large Language Models, on the other hand, possess rich internal knowledge and are naturally more resistant to interference (Achiam et al., 2023; Qi et al., 2023; Chang et al., 2024).

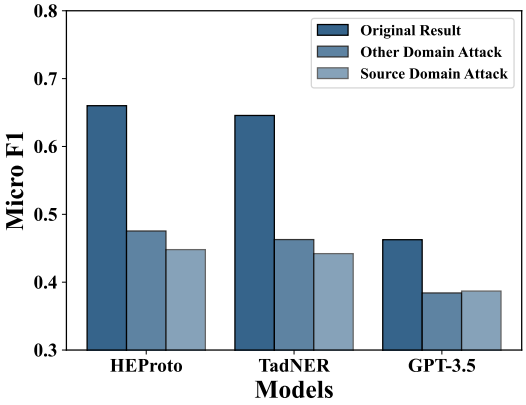

Figure 3: Results of different domain "entity attacks" on SOTA methods and GPT-3.5 on Few-NERD dataset. "Other Domain" denotes the dev set, and "Source Domain" refers to the train set.

A.2 Datasets and Experimental Setup

We evaluate Double-Checker on standard few-shot NER dataset Few-NERD (Ding et al., 2021), which consists of 8 coarse-grained entity types and 66 fine-grained entity types. It is divided into Intra and Inter settings, and the entity types of the train set, dev set and test set are non-overlapping under each setting. In this case, the Intra setting is divided according to coarse-grained types, while the Inter

is divided according to fine-grained types.

We choose the two SOTA methods (HEProto (Chen et al., 2023) and TadNER (Li et al., 2023)) as our SLMs, and use GPT-3.5-turbo as the LLM for all experiments. Follow previous works (Ma et al., 2022b; Chen et al., 2023), we use the entity-level micro f1 score for evaluation, which requires both the predicted entity span and type to be correct. For quantile point α, we set it to 0.5 for Inter setting and 0.7 to Intra setting.

A.3 Prompt Example

We select a candidate from target sentence and construct the corresponding prompt, the details of which are shown in the Table 3.

A.4 Type Definition Example

We use GPT-3.5-turbo to generate the full type definitions in the test set for both Intra and Inter settings, which are presented in the Table 4 and 5.

<First-stage Check Prompt>
Given the Type Definition, Sentence, Types, and Candidate, answer the Question.
Type Definition: location-GPE includes names of countries, cities, states, provinces, and other regions that have a political or geographical significance. None refers an entity that does not belong to the above types, or is not an entity.
Sentence: he was born into a christian family in the predominantly muslim north.
Types: location-GPE, None
Candidate: muslim north
Question: Please refer to Type Definition and select the most relevant type (from Types) for Candidate in the Sentence. Answer in the format of json like: {'answer': ''}

<Second-stage Check Prompt>
Question: Consider the Possible Type {first-stage answer}, whether the Candidate in the Sentence is an entity or not. Answer in the format of json like: {'answer': ''}

Table 3: An example of the prompt of our two-stage check.

Type Defnition
location-GPE includes names of countries, cities, states, provinces, and other regions that have a political or geographical significance.
location-other is a catch-all category within the location entity type that includes geographical locations which do not fit into the more specific subcategories listed.
location-mountain refers to geographical entities that are elevated landforms characterized by steep slopes, rocky terrain, and often having peaks or summits.
location-bodiesofwater refers to geographical entities that are large bodies of water, such as oceans, seas, rivers, lakes, and other water reservoirs.
location-island refers to geographical entities that are landmasses surrounded by water on all sides.
location-park refers to designated areas of land that are preserved or managed for recreational, conservation, or aesthetic purposes.
location-road/railway/highway/transit refers to infrastructure designed for transportation, including roads, railways, highways, and transit systems.
organization-education refers to institutions or entities primarily focused on providing education and academic instruction.
organization-government/governmentagency refers to entities that are part of or associated with governmental bodies and agencies.
organization-company refers to entities that are businesses or commercial enterprises. This category includes names of companies, corporations, firms, and other types of business organizations.
organization-politicalparty refers to entities that are organized groups of people with similar political aims and opinions.
organization-other is a category within the organization entity type that includes organized groups or entities which do not fit into the more specific subcategories listed.
organization-media/newspaper refers to entities involved in the production and dissemination of news and information to the public through various media channels.
organization-religion refers to entities associated with religious beliefs, practices, and institutions.
organization-showorganization refers to entities involved in the production, promotion, or organization of entertainment events and performances.
organization-sportsleague refers to entities that are structured groups or associations governing a particular sport or a group of sports.
organization-sportsteam refers to entities that are teams participating in competitive sports, usually within the structure of a sports league or association.

Table 4: Definition of types on the target domain of Few-NERD Intra.

Type Defnition
other-medical refers to entities, concepts, or items related to the field of medicine that do not fit into more specific categories.
person-athlete refers to individuals who engage in physical sports or other forms of competitive physical activities.
event-sportsevent refers to organized competitive events or activities in which athletes or teams participate in sports.
art-music refers to entities and works associated with the creation, performance, and recording of music.
other-livingthing refers to entities that are living organisms but do not fit into more specific categories like humans, specific animals, or plants.
building-hospital refers to structures specifically designed and equipped for the delivery of healthcare services.
building-theater refers to structures specifically designed for the performance of live entertainment, such as plays, musicals, dance performances, concerts, and other stage productions.
other-educationaldegree refers to academic qualifications or titles that do not belong to more specific categories within the educational domain.
person-actor refers to individuals who professionally perform roles in plays, films, television shows, or other forms of entertainment media.
product-car refers to automobiles or vehicles designed for transportation purposes.
product-weapon refers to devices or instruments designed or used for inflicting harm, damage, or destruction.
art-writtenart refers to artistic works that are expressed through the written word.
event-election refers to the process of selecting individuals for specific roles or positions through a structured voting system.
None refers an entity that does not belong to the above types, or is not an entity.

Table 5: Definition of types on the target domain of Few-NERD Inter, some of which are described in Table 4.