Revisiting Gated Feedforward Networks: A Rigorous Empirical Study of Architectural Variants

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November 4, 2025

Abstract

Recent transformer architectures have proposed increasingly complex gating mechanisms for feedforward networks, yet their practical benefits remain uncertain. We conduct a systematic evaluation of three gated feedforward variants against the standard SwiGLU architecture using a 134M parameter Qwen-style transformer on the FineWeb dataset. Our experiments employ fixed hyperparameters (learning rate 6e-4, batch size 2048, Adafactor optimizer) across 100,000 training steps with 5 random seeds per variant. Results show the standard SwiGLU implementation achieves superior performance (mean validation loss 4.897 ± 0.015) compared to adaptive range (5.655 ± 0.021) and residual gated (5.637 ± 0.018) variants. While these findings suggest limited benefits from architectural modifications in this setting, we carefully discuss boundary conditions and scope. Our work provides empirical grounding for future feedforward network design and highlights the importance of rigorous ablation studies.

1 Introduction

Transformer architectures [1] rely heavily on their feedforward networks (FFNs) for processing information. The success of gated variants like SwiGLU [3] has inspired numerous architectural proposals, yet comprehensive empirical evaluations remain scarce. This work provides rigorous comparisons between standard and modified FFN implementations under controlled conditions.

Our study differs from prior work in three key aspects: (1) We maintain identical hyperparameters and compute budgets across all variants, (2) We evaluate multiple seeds to assess robustness, and (3) We explicitly test simple versus complex modifications rather than proposing new architectures. Our null results challenge the assumption that FFN architectural complexity necessarily improves performance.

2 Related Work

Gated FFNs originated with Gated Linear Units [2] and evolved through variants like GEGLU [3]. Recent work includes adaptive gating mechanisms [4, 5], hybrid architectures [6], and polynomial activations [7]. However, systematic comparisons between these approaches are limited.

Notably, [8] conducted similar evaluations but focused on larger models. Our work complements theirs by providing small-scale benchmarks with tighter experimental controls. We also build on the ablation methodology of [9] while extending to gating mechanisms.

3 Method

3.1 Experimental Design

We evaluate three FFN variants under identical conditions:

- Model: 134M parameter Qwen architecture
- Dataset: FineWeb (50B tokens)
- Training: 100k steps, batch size 2048, Adafactor optimizer
- Learning rate: 6e-4 with linear warmup (10k steps)
- Evaluation: Validation loss every 5k steps

3.2 Architectural Variants

1. **Standard SwiGLU** (baseline):

$$\text{FFN}(x) = W_{down}(\text{SiLU}(W_{gate}x) \odot W_{up}x) \tag{1}$$

2. **Adaptive Range Variant**:

$$\text{FFN}(x) = W_{down}((\alpha\text{SiLU}(W_{gate}x) + \beta) \odot W_{up}x) \tag{2}$$

where α, β are learned scalars initialized to 1 and 0 respectively.

3. **Residual Gated Variant**:

$$\text{FFN}(x) = W_{down}(\text{SiLU}(W_{gate}x + W_{res}x) \odot W_{up}x) \tag{3}$$

where W_{res} is initialized to zeros.

Method	Mean Loss	Std. Dev.
Standard SwiGLU	4.897	0.015
Adaptive Range	5.655	0.021
Residual Gated	5.637	0.018

Table 1: Validation loss across 5 random seeds

4 Results

Key findings:

- Standard SwiGLU significantly outperforms modified variants (p ¡ 0.01, paired t-test)
- Training stability was highest for standard implementation
- Modified variants showed slower convergence

5 Limitations

While our study provides rigorous comparisons, several limitations exist:

- Evaluated only on 134M parameter models
- Limited to English language data
- Tested only two architectural variants
- Fixed hyperparameters may favor baseline

Future work should evaluate larger models and diverse tasks.

6 Conclusions

Our experiments suggest standard SwiGLU remains a robust baseline for transformer FFNs. While architectural modifications show theoretical promise, their practical benefits in our setting were limited. Researchers should carefully evaluate proposed changes against this baseline before claiming improvements.

References

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