Modeling of a combined CH₄-assisted solid oxide co-electrolysis and Fischer-Tropsch synthesis system for low-carbon fuel production

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Abstract

CH₄-assisted solid oxide electrolyzer cells (SOECs) can co-electrolyze H₂O and CO₂ effectively for simultaneous energy storage and CO₂ utilization. Compared with conventional SOECs, CH₄-assisted SOECs consume less electricity because CH₄ in the anode provides part of the energy for electrolysis. As syngas (CO and H₂ mixture) is generated from the co-electrolysis process, it is necessary to study its utilization through the subsequent processes, such as Fischer-Tropsch (F-T) synthesis. An F-T reactor can convert syngas into hydrocarbons, and thus it is very suitable for the utilization of syngas. In this paper, the combined CH₄-assisted SOEC and F-T synthesis system is numerically studied. Validated 2D models for CH₄-assisted SOEC and F-T processes are adopted for parametric studies. It is found that the cathode inlet H₂O/CO₂ ratio in the SOEC significantly affects the production components through the F-T process. Other operating parameters such as the operating temperature and applied voltage of the SOEC are found to greatly affect the productions of the system. This model can be used for understanding and design optimization of the combined fuel-assisted SOEC and F-T synthesis system to achieve economical hydrocarbon generation.

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Keywords: Solid oxide electrolyzer cell; Fischer-Tropsch synthesis; Mathematical modeling; Hydrocarbon generation

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1. Introduction

With the growing attention on global warming, effective CO₂ utilization methods are urgently needed. Solid oxide electrolyzer cells (SOECs) are promising technologies to convert CO₂ into chemical fuels such as CO. Compared with low-temperature electrolyzers, SOECs consume less electrical energy as part of the input energy comes from heat. The high operating temperature also allows the use of non-noble catalysts in the SOEC, leading to a lower overall cost. Recently, the concept of fuel-assisted SOECs has been demonstrated, where low-cost fuels (e.g. methane) are supplied to the anode to reduce the operating potentials of the SOEC [1]. The fuel-assisted SOECs can even electrolyze oxidants without consuming electricity, which means it is possible to convert CO₂ to fuels by only consuming low-cost fuels in the SOEC [2].

SOECs can co-electrolyze H₂O and CO₂ and generate syngas (H₂ and CO mixture), which can be further utilized in the Fischer-Tropsch (F-T) reactor for low carbon fuel production [3, 4]. As methane is usually less wanted from the F-T synthesis process, it is therefore suitable to use methane as the assistant fuel in the SOEC for CO₂ and H₂O co-electrolysis. A system consisting of a CH₄-assisted SOEC and a F-T reactor is very promising for CO₂ utilization and hydrocarbon fuel generation. However, despite some preliminary studies on the combined SOEC and F-T systems [5, 6], no study on a combined fuel-assisted SOEC and F-T reactor system has been conducted thus far. To fill this research gap, in this work 2D mathematical models are developed for a combined CH₄-assisted SOEC and F-T reactor system for H₂O/CO₂ co-electrolysis and hydrocarbon fuel generation. The sub-models for the CH₄-assisted SOEC and the F-T reactor are validated in the previous studies [7, 8]. Parametric simulations are conducted to understand the characteristics of such a system and the interplay of different physical/chemical processes.

2. Model description

The proposed hybrid system consists of a CH₄-assisted SOEC and a F-T reactor, as shown in Fig. 1. In the SOEC anode, CH₄ and H₂O are supplied to anode with a ratio of 1:1.5 to avoid methane coking. CO₂ and H₂O are supplied to the cathode, where they are electrolyzed to generate syngas. Syngas generated from the SOEC section is collected for F-T reactor, where hydrocarbons are generated through the synthesis process.

2D numerical models are developed to simulate the characteristics of the system, the model kinetics for both the CH₄-assisted SOEC and the F-T reactor are validated by using prior published work [7, 8]. The tubular SOEC has a length of 7 cm, an inner diameter of 0.3 cm and an outer diameter of 0.5 cm. It uses Ni-YSZ as anode support layer, Ni-ScSZ as anode active layer, ScSZ as electrolyte and Ni-ScSZ as cathode. The tubular F-T reactor has a length of 30 cm and an outer diameter of 1 cm. It uses Fe based catalyst for the improvement of synthesis reaction rates. The material properties for the SOEC can be found in Table 1.

For model simplification, the following assumptions are adopted:
1. The electrochemical reaction active sites are assumed to be uniformly distributed in the porous electrodes.
2. The electronic and ionic conducting phases are continuous and homogeneous in the porous electrodes.
3. All the gases are considered as ideal gases.
4. Temperature distribution is uniform in the reactors due to the small size.

![Fig. 1. Schematic of combined CH₄-assisted SOEC and F-T reactor system](image-url)
Table 1. Material properties.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameters</th>
<th>Value or expression</th>
<th>Unit</th>
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<tr>
<td>$\sigma_{SCSZ}$</td>
<td>$69200 \times e^{-\frac{E_{act}}{T}}$</td>
<td>S m$^{-1}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\sigma_{VSZ}$</td>
<td>$33400 \times e^{-\frac{E_{vsz}}{T}}$</td>
<td>S m$^{-1}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\sigma_{NI}$</td>
<td>$4.2 \times 10^6 - 1065.3T$</td>
<td>S m$^{-1}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\varepsilon$</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\tau$</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$S_{TPB}$</td>
<td>$2.14 \times 10^5$</td>
<td>m$^{-1}$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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2.1. Sub-model of CH$_4$-assisted SOEC for CO$_2$ and H$_2$O co-electrolysis

As shown in Fig. 1, the gas mixture of H$_2$O and CO$_2$ flows into the cathode channel, while the gas mixture of CH$_4$ and H$_2$O flows into the anode channel. In the cathode, both H$_2$O and CO$_2$ are reduced to generate H$_2$ and CO as shown in Eq. (1) and Eq. (2), respectively.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{H}_2\text{O} + 2e^- &= \text{H}_2 + \text{O}_2^- \quad (1) \\
\text{CO}_2 + 2e^- &= \text{CO} + \text{O}_2^- \quad (2)
\end{align*}
\]

In the anode, the methane steam reforming (MSR) reaction happens to generate H$_2$ and CO, which are then electrochemically oxidized by the O$_2^-$ transported from the cathode. The MSR reaction and electrochemical oxidizations of H$_2$ and CO are listed as shown in Eq. (3) to Eq. (5).

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{CH}_4 + \text{H}_2\text{O} &= \text{CO} + 3\text{H}_2 \quad (3) \\
\text{H}_2 + 2\text{O}_2^- &= \text{H}_2\text{O} + 2e^- \quad (4) \\
\text{CO} + 2\text{O}_2^- &= \text{CO}_2 + 2e^- \quad (5)
\end{align*}
\]

Due to the existence of H$_2$O and CO, water gas shift reaction (WGSR) occurs in both anode and cathode as

\[
\text{CO} + \text{H}_2\text{O} = \text{CO}_2 + \text{H}_2.
\]

In operation, the required voltage applied to SOEC can be calculated by Eq. (7):

\[
V = E + \eta_{\text{act}} + \eta_{\text{ohmic}},
\]

where E is the equilibrium potential related with thermodynamics; $\eta_{\text{act}}$ is the activation overpotentials reflecting the electrochemical activities and $\eta_{\text{ohmic}}$ is the ohmic overpotential calculated by the Ohmic law.

The calculation of equilibrium potential is based on oxygen partial pressure [9] and calculated as:

\[
E = \frac{RT}{nF} \ln \left( \frac{\Sigma p_{\text{H}_2\text{O}}^{\text{L}}}{\Sigma p_{\text{O}_2\text{an}}^{\text{L}}} \right), \quad (8)
\]

where R is the universal gas constant (8.3145 J mol$^{-1}$ K$^{-1}$), T is temperature (K), F is the Faraday constant (96485 C mol$^{-1}$), $n$ is the number of electrons transferred per electrochemical reaction, $p_{\text{H}_2\text{O}}^{\text{L}}$ and $p_{\text{O}_2\text{an}}^{\text{L}}$ are oxygen partial pressures in the cathode and anode, respectively.

For the pairs of H$_2$O/H$_2$ and CO$_2$/CO, their oxygen partial pressures can be expressed by:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{p}_{\text{H}_2\text{O}}^{\text{L}}(\text{H}_2\text{O}/\text{H}_2) = \frac{\text{p}_{\text{H}_2\text{O}}^{\text{L}}}{\text{p}_{\text{H}_2}^{\text{L}}} \left( e^{-\frac{\Delta G_{\text{H}_2\text{O}/\text{H}_2}}{RT}} \right)^2, \quad (9) \\
&\text{p}_{\text{O}_2}^{\text{L}}(\text{CO}_2/\text{CO}) = \frac{\text{p}_{\text{O}_2}^{\text{L}}}{\text{p}_{\text{CO}}^{\text{L}}} \left( e^{-\frac{\Delta G_{\text{CO}_2/\text{CO}}}{RT}} \right)^2, \quad (10)
\end{align*}
\]

where $p_{\text{H}_2\text{O}}$, $p_{\text{H}_2}$, $p_{\text{CO}_2}$ and $p_{\text{CO}}$ are local partial pressures of H$_2$O, H$_2$, CO$_2$ and CO, respectively. $\Delta G_{\text{H}_2\text{O}/\text{H}_2}$ and $\Delta G_{\text{CO}_2/\text{CO}}$ are the Gibbs free energy change in the H$_2$ and CO oxidation reactions, respectively.

The activation overpotential is calculated by the Butler-Volmer equation

\[
i = i_0 \left\{ \exp \left( \frac{E_{\text{act}}}{RT} \right) - \exp \left( \frac{-(1-\alpha)E_{\text{act}}}{RT} \right) \right\},
\]

where $i_0$ is the exchange current density and $\alpha$ is the electronic transfer coefficient. For H$_2$O electrolysis, the exchange current density can be further expressed as

\[
i_0 = \beta \frac{p_{\text{H}_2\text{O}}^{\text{L}} p_{\text{H}_2}^{\text{L}}}{P_{\text{ref}}^{\text{L}}} \exp \left( -\frac{E_2}{RT} \right),
\]

[12]
where $\beta$ is the activity factor and $E_a$ is the activation energy. For CO$_2$ electrolysis, its exchange current density is 0.45 times of H$_2$O electrolysis [10]. All the kinetics for above reactions can be found in Table 2.

<table>
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<td>$\beta$</td>
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<tr>
<td>$E_a$</td>
<td>$1.2 \times 10^5$</td>
<td>J mol$^{-1}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\sigma_{H_2O}$</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\sigma_{CO_2}$</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R_{MSR}$</td>
<td>$k_{rf}(P_{H_2}P_{H_2O} - \frac{p_{H_2}P_{CO_2}}{K_{pr}})$</td>
<td>mol m$^{-3}$ s$^{-1}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$k_{rf}$</td>
<td>$2395 \exp(- \frac{-233266}{RT})$</td>
<td>mol m$^{-3}$ Pa$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$K_{pr}$</td>
<td>$1.0267 \times 10^{19} \exp(-0.2513Z^4 + 0.3665Z^3 + 0.5810Z^2 - 27.134Z + 3.277)$</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>$R_{WGSR}$</td>
<td>$k_{sf}(P_{H_2}P_{CO} - \frac{p_{H_2}P_{CO_2}}{K_{ps}})$</td>
<td>mol m$^{-3}$ s$^{-1}$</td>
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<tr>
<td>$k_{sf}$</td>
<td>$0.0171 \exp(- \frac{-10319}{RT})$</td>
<td>mol m$^{-3}$ Pa$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$K_{ps}$</td>
<td>$\exp(-0.2935Z^3 + 0.6351Z^2 + 4.1788Z + 0.3169)$</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>$Z$</td>
<td>$\frac{1000}{\tau} - 1$</td>
<td></td>
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### 2.2. Sub-model of F-T reactor

The F-T reactor uses Fe-HZSM5 as catalyst and works at 573 K and 2 MPa for syngas synthesis. The reactions in the F-T process are shown in Eq. (13) to Eq. (20).

\[
\begin{align*}
CO + 3H_2 & = CH_4 + H_2O \\
2CO + 4H_2 & = C_2H_4 + 2H_2O \\
2CO + 5H_2 & = C_2H_6 + 2H_2O \\
3CO + 7H_2 & = C_3H_8 + 3H_2O \\
4CO + 9H_2 & = n - C_4H_{10} + 4H_2O \\
4CO + 9H_2 & = t - C_4H_{10} + 4H_2O \\
6.05CO + 12.23H_2 & = C_{6.05}H_{12.36} + 6.05H_2O \\
CO + H_2O & = CO_2 + H_2
\end{align*}
\]

The reaction kinetics for above reactions can be expressed as [8]

\[
R_i = 0.278k_i \exp\left(-\frac{E_i}{RT}\right)p_{CO}^{m_i}\cdot p_{H_2}^{n_i}
\]

### 2.3. CFD Sub-model

For both the SOEC and the F-T reactor, the mass transport of gas species is calculated by extended Fick’s law

\[
N_i = -\frac{1}{RT} \left( \frac{\partial y_i}{\partial \mu} \nabla P - D_{i\text{eff}} \nabla (y_i P) \right) (i = 1, ..., n),
\]

where $B_0$ is the material permeability, $\mu$ is the gas viscosity, $y_i$ and $D_{i\text{eff}}$ are the mole fraction and effective diffusion coefficient of component $i$, respectively. $D_{i\text{eff}}$ can be further determined by

\[
D_{i\text{eff}} = \frac{\varepsilon}{\tau} \left( \frac{\mu_{i\text{im}} D_{i\text{in}}}{D_{i\text{in}}} \right)^{-1},
\]

where $\varepsilon$ is the porosity, $\tau$ is the tortuosity factor, $D_{i\text{in}}$ is the molecular diffusion coefficient and $D_{i\text{Kn}}$ is the Knudsen diffusion coefficient [13].

The mass conservation can be described by

\[
\nabla (-D_{i\text{eff}} \nabla c_i) = r_i,
\]
where \( c_i \) is the gas molar concentration and \( r_i \) is the mass source term of the gaseous species.

Navier-Stokes equation with Darcy’s term is adopted to calculate the momentum transport in both the SOEC and F-T reactor as shown in Eq. (25).

\[
\frac{\partial u}{\partial t} + \rho u \nabla u = -\nabla p + \nabla \left[ \mu \left( \nabla u + (\nabla u)^T \right) - \frac{2}{3} \mu \nabla \right] - \frac{\epsilon \nu u}{k}
\]  

Here \( \rho \) is the gas density and \( u \) is the velocity vector.

2.4. Boundary conditions and model solution

Electric potentials are specified at the outer surface of two electrodes with the cell ends electrical insulated. Inlet gas flow rate and mole fraction of the species are given at inlets of the SOEC. The ratio of \( H_2 \) to \( CO \) for F-T reactor inlet is consistent with the ratio of \( H_2 \) to \( CO \) of SOEC cathode outlet. The numerical models are solved at given parameters using commercial software COMSOL MULTIPHYSICS®.

3. Results and discussions

As shown in Fig. 2(a), with the increase of SOEC operating temperature, the mole fractions of \( H_2 \) and \( CO \) in the outlets significantly increase due to the improved electrochemical activity. With the more complete conversion of \( CO_2 \) at higher temperatures, the ratio of outlet \( H_2/CO \) continuously decreases from \( \sim 8 \) to \( \sim 1 \), indicating the much-increased CO fraction in the generated syngas.

Besides, the applied voltage largely affects the performance of the SOEC, as shown in Fig. 2(b). Compared with traditional SOECs working at 1V ~ 3 V applied voltage, the \( CH_4 \)-assisted SOEC performs well at a low applied voltage. The mole fraction of syngas in the outlet is closed to 1 at 0.7 V and the cell can even work at 0 V applied voltage with the driven force provided by \( CH_4 \) in the anode, which means no input electrical power is needed. Therefore, the SOEC offers a high conversion rate while only consume very limited electricity benefited from methane assistance.

The characteristic of \( CH_m \) production with the change of inlet \( H_2/CO \) ratio from the F-T reactor is shown in Fig. 2(c), where the mole fraction of both total hydrocarbons and \( CH_4 \) are found to be improved with the increase of inlet \( H_2 \) mole fraction. For comparison, the outlet mole fractions of \( C_2H_6, C_3H_8 \) and \( C_5+ \) show slightly increase at higher inlet \( H_2 \) mole fraction, while nearly no changed is found on the outlet mole fractions of \( C_3H_4 \) and \( C_4H_{10} \).

Finally, the mole fractions of low-carbon fuels production from the F-T reactor with the change of inlet \( H_2O/CO_2 \) ratio of the \( CH_4 \)-assisted SOEC is shown in Fig. 2(d). At small \( H_2O/CO_2 \) ratio (0.3: 0.7) for SOEC inlet, the F-T reactor generates 4 times \( C_2 \sim C_5+ \) as much as \( CH_4 \). When the \( H_2O/CO_2 \) ratio increases 0.5: 0.5, the outlet \( C_2 \sim C_5+ \) and \( CH_4 \) also comes to a similar level. At the 0.6: 0.4 \( H_2O/CO_2 \) ratio, \( CH_4 \) generated by the F-T reactor becomes much larger than \( C_2 \sim C_5+ \), with a ratio close to 2: 1.
4. Conclusions

The first 2D model combining a CH₄-assisted solid oxide co-electrolysis and Fischer-Tropsch synthesis system for low-carbon fuel production is developed in this paper. The kinetics of the model are validated by using previous studies. CO₂ and H₂O are used as the raw materials in the SOEC section for the generation of low-carbon fuel through the F-T reactor. By conducting parametric studies, it is found that the operating temperature, the applied voltage and the inlet H₂O/CO₂ ratio significantly affect the outlet syngas components of SOEC, thus greatly affect the characteristics of the hydrocarbons synthesized by the F-T reactor. As a result, the mole fractions of CH₄ and C₂–C₅, generated by the F-T reactor can be controlled by adjusting the inlet H₂O/CO₂ ratio in the electrolysis process. This study builds a solid foundation for the understanding and optimization of a combined fuel-assisted SOEC and F-T reactor system.

Acknowledgements

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References