Experiments and Modeling of Ion Exchange Resins for Nuclear Power Plants

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Abstract—Resins are used in nuclear power plants for water ultrapurification. Two approaches are considered in this work: column experiments and simulations. A software called OPTIPUR was developed, tested and used. The approach simulates the one-dimensional reactive transport in porous medium with convective-dispersive transport between particles and diffusive transport within the boundary layer around the particles. The transfer limitation in the boundary layer is characterized by the mass transfer coefficient (MTC). The influences on MTC were measured experimentally. The variation of the inlet concentration does not influence the MTC; on the contrary of the Darcy velocity which influences. This is consistent with results obtained using the correlation of Dwivedi&Upadhyay. With the MTC, knowing the number of exchange sites and the relative affinity, OPTIPUR can simulate the column outlet concentration versus time. Then, the duration of use of resins can be predicted in conditions of a binary exchange.

Keywords—ion exchange resin, mass transfer coefficient, modeling, OPTIPUR

I. INTRODUCTION

ION exchange resins (resins) are used in manufacturing ultrapure water for nuclear power plants. Resins allow the removal of ionic impurities to subparts-per-million. Thereby in nuclear power plants, resins contribute to guarantee personnel safety, to control feed system fouling, and to keep materials performance. In order to improve removal efficiency of the resins process and to limit the amount of waste, mechanism of resins has to be better understood and predicted.

II. NUMERICAL SOLUTION METHODS

A. Transport in OPTIPUR

The resolution of advective-dispersive transport (1), in a column with resins, is realized by OPTIPUR's tool. It is a software for simulation, built from HYTEC in which diffusion/dispersion coefficients are considered independent of the species [6], [10]: this assumption is valid for strongly
advective cases, relevant for water purification circuits in nuclear power plants.

\[ \frac{\partial c}{\partial t} = \text{div}(D_{\text{we}} \text{grad} c - \epsilon \vec{U}) \]  
(1)

Equation (1) is solved for the column with a 1D finite volume approach. This equation is discretized spatially by a first-order upstream spatial scheme for advection and by a second order centered spatial scheme for dispersion. The time discretization is a one-step centered scheme [10].

**B. Chemistry in OPTIPUR**

The chemistry in OPTIPUR is based on chemical library from CHESS [11]. The aqueous reaction and the ion exchange reaction are considered at equilibrium. No chemical kinetic is taken into account, considering that the limiting phenomenon is the diffusion within the Nernst film. The resolution is based on the basis component formalism: chemically independent basis species are chosen, in such way that all the derivative species, aqueous complexes or sorption sites, can be expressed with these basis species. The chemical system is obtained from the mass balance equations associated to each basis species (mass balance equation of total concentration) and from the mass action law equations associated to each derivative species.

**C. Coupling of chemistry and transport**

- Base of the coupling between chemistry and transport [5]

The coupling is based on a sequential iterative algorithm. At the first iteration of a new time step, initial condition is given specifying the concentration of free and sorbed species. The transport modifies the total aqueous concentration for each basis species locally at each discretization node. A chemical resolution then calculates the new speciation, particularly the new concentration of sorbed total concentration of each basis species and for each node between two iterations.

- With a diffusive term [5]

Nernst’s model postulates that near the resin-water interface, there is a stagnant layer called Nernst film, where the transport is only diffusive. The transport is then convective-dispersive between the particles of resin and diffusive in the Nernst film (fig. 1).

This representation is implemented in OPTIPUR, with a separation of the water in the Nernst film, the water between the particle of resin into which ions exchange is forbidden, and the water at the interface with resin, which have their own concentrations (fig. 2). Chemical equilibrium is assumed in the different areas, which have their own porosity.

![Schematic diagram of the fluidized bed of resin](image1.png)

Fig. 1 Schematic diagram of the fluidized bed of resin

![Schematic diagram of the particle of resin and the Nernst Film with the correspondent concentration](image2.png)

Fig. 2 Schematic diagram of the particle of resin and the Nernst Film with the correspondent concentration

The flux of basis species between « interstitial water » area and interface area, for a same height in the column is proportional to the difference of mobile species concentration between these two zones.

\[ J_i = k_a \varepsilon_i (1 - \varepsilon_b) (c_i - c^*_i) \]  
(2)

For the transport, it is then necessary to solve the following system of equations:

\[
\begin{aligned}
\frac{\partial (\varepsilon_i c_i)}{\partial t} &= \text{div}\left(D_{\text{we}} \text{grad} c_i - \varepsilon_i \vec{U}ight) - k_a \varepsilon_i (1 - \varepsilon_b) (c_i - c^*_i) \\
\frac{\partial (\varepsilon_i c^*_i + (1 - \varepsilon_b) q_i)}{\partial t} &= k_a \varepsilon_i (1 - \varepsilon_b) (c_i - c^*_i)
\end{aligned}
\]  
(3)

In this model, MTC is the ratio of the diffusion coefficient to the boundary layer thickness; it has a velocity dimension and allows to characterize the limitation by mass transfer across Nernst film (2). The MTC is the same for all the species.

**III. EXPERIMENTAL METHODS**

A series of experiments were conducted in order to characterize the behavior of the resins. We focus on a cationic resin (table 1), used to eliminate corrosion products like Fe, Co, and Ni. Ni has been chosen because this element is a relevant radioactive contaminant. The influences on the initial leakage of the inlet concentration of nickel on the one hand, and of the velocity on the other hand have been investigated. Indeed, these parameters can vary in nuclear power plants operations. Representative mixtures of nuclear power plant shutdown were prepared. First of all, a nickel powder with a high purity (99.9 %) was dissolved in a boric acid solution with bore concentration 2000 ppm. In order to make improve the dissolution, the flasks were put in a thermal chamber at 323 K. After two weeks, the solution was filtered.

A certain quantity (6 g) of humid resins was put in a 15 mm-diameter column. After that, the resin in column was regenerated with chlorhydric acid (1 mol. L\(^{-1}\)) and rinsed with ultrapure water (18.2 MΩ). Finally, the resin in the column was compacted using a high flow rate injection. The height of the fluidized bed was equal to 46 mm.
Finally, the initial solution with a known concentration (table 2) was injected through a column with a Darcy velocity similar to nuclear power plant velocity (table 3).

Two samples were collected at the column outlet after two minutes. Each sample was analyzed four times with an Inductively Coupled Plasma - Atomic Emission Spectroscopy (ICP-AES) ICAP 6500 from Thermo Fisher. The experiment was reproduced on many columns in the same conditions. The experimental system used is schematized fig 3.

With the initial leakage measured at the beginning of the experiment, it is possible to calculate the mass transfer coefficient. In this intent, and to simplify the transport equations, the concentration at the particle-film, the accumulation in aqueous phase (both acceptable assumptions at the early stage of injection) and the term of diffusion-dispersion are considered negligible.

The transport equations can this be simplified to obtain, which can be solved analytically:

$$0 = \frac{\partial}{\partial z} (-\varepsilon \rho_0) - (1 - \varepsilon) x k \alpha a c$$

After integration, the expression of mass transfer coefficient obtained is:

$$k = \left( \frac{1}{6(1-\varepsilon)} \right) \frac{U}{Z} d_x \ln \left( \frac{c_{out}}{c_{in}} \right)$$  \hspace{1cm} (5)

The model used in OPTIPUR leads to an expression of mass transfer coefficient during an initial leakage similar to the one used by Chowdiah and al. [4]. These authors have demonstrated [12] that the most appropriatedempirical correlation to estimate the mass transfer coefficient in domain of ultrapure water production is the following relationship:

$$k = \frac{D}{d_x} \times Sc^{0,15} \times Re^{0,765} + \frac{0,365}{(\varepsilon_x Re)^{0,336}}$$  \hspace{1cm} (6)

This formula is particularly adapted for our experimental conditions, as its limit of validity depends mainly on a Reynolds number with values between 0.03 and 42000 [12].

Application of the equation (6) in a binary exchange of ions with different mobility supposes to have a representative diffusion coefficient. In this study, without means to do an a priori estimation, the diffusion coefficient is considered as an adjustable parameter.

IV. EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS AND THEIR MODELING

A. Experiments and Modeling of Initial Leakage

Fig. 4 shows the influence of the inlet concentration on the mass transfer coefficient. The MTC is determined using (5) with an experimental uncertainty of ± 10 %. The MTC seems to be stable for the tested range of concentrations and equal to $8.05 \times 10^{-5} \, \text{m.s}^{-1}$; this is consistent with the underlying theory.

![Fig. 4 Mass transfer coefficient of nickel versus inlet concentration](image)

**Fig. 4 Mass transfer coefficient of nickel versus inlet concentration**

For fixed $\text{Re}=15$, experimentally measured and calculated from Dwivedi and Upadhyay[12] correlation with $D=6.6 \times 10^{-10} \, \text{m}^2 \cdot \text{s}^{-1}$

On the contrary, the mass transfer coefficient increases linearly as a function of the Reynolds numbers (Fig. 5). In fact, the Nernst film thickness declines when the Darcy velocity grows up. The MTC is more important in this case. The MTC values experimentally obtained with their uncertainty and the MTC values from correlation presents important domains of covering. Consequently, the correlation of Dwivedi and Upadhyay could be used in order to estimate the velocity influence on the mass transfer coefficient in OPTIPUR.
The mass transfer coefficient model implemented in OPTIPUR correctly reproduces the evolution of the normalized outlet concentration versus time for a binary exchange from the initial leakage.

V. CONCLUSION

In order to understand behavior of ion exchange in columns, a numerical tool was developed. It couples the chemistry and the transport aspects including diffusion. A mass transfer coefficient has to be introduced and validated. An experimental work was performed to study the initial leakage and estimate the mass transfer coefficients. Their values were compared to those obtained by the Dwivedi & Upadhyay correlation. Apparently, the inlet concentrations have no influence, whereas the MTC values seem to increase with the Reynolds numbers. This is explained by the decrease in the Nernst film thickness with increasing velocity. When the mass transfer coefficient is known, and using the ion selectivity values for the resin, OPTIPUR can simulate the behavior of the resins during a binary exchange. The code yields the curves of the outlet concentration as a function of time; it is thus possible to anticipate the breakthrough, and consequently the life-time of the resins. This study will be completed by improvement of OPTIPUR in progress, in order to consider the multi-component exchange with a diffusion coefficient adapted for each species.

NOTATIONS

- $a$: specific surface area of resin ($m^2.m^{-3}$ resin)
- $c$: concentration (mol.m$^{-3}$)
- $c_i^p$: concentration of species $i$ in interstitial water (mol.m$^{-3}$)
- $c_{i,m}^p$: concentration of species $i$ at the interface Nernst film-particle of resin (mol.m$^{-3}$)
- $c_{i,i}^p$: inlet concentration of species $i$ (mol.m$^{-3}$)
- $c_{i,o}^p$: outlet concentration of species $i$ (mol.m$^{-3}$)
- $D_{sd}$: diffusion / dispersion coefficient ($m^2.s^{-1}$)
- $D$: diffusion coefficient ($m^2.s^{-1}$)
- $d_p$: particle diameter (m)
- $k$: mass transfer coefficient (m.s$^{-1}$)
- $J$: flux (mol.s$^{-1}$)
- $q_i$: concentration of species $i$ in particle of resin (mol.m$^{-3}$)
- $S$: Schmidt number (v/D)
- $Re$: Reynolds number (($d_p U p)/(\mu c)$)
- $t$: time (s)
- $U$: velocity of Darcy (m.s$^{-1}$)
- $Z$: column highest (m)
- $\epsilon_p$: principal porosity (volume of water between resin’s particles / total volume)
- $\epsilon_{if}$: interface porosity (volume of water on the interface of resin’s particles / total volume)
- $\rho$: volume mass (kg.m$^{-3}$)
- $\mu$: dynamic viscosity (kg.m$^{-1}.s$)

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