Implementation and Characterization of an Ejector Based Hydrogen Recirculation System for a PEM Fuel Cell

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Abstract

One of the issues that needs to be studied in order to improve the durability of a PEM fuel cell system is the management of the hydrogen feeding procedure. It has been demonstrated that its efficiency and durability are improved when using a hydrogen recirculation system.

In this work, an ejector has been designed and manufactured to be implemented in an experimental PEM fuel cell Test Station to analyse how ejector based hydrogen recirculation systems affect PEM fuel cells. The proper design of an ejector must take into account several geometrical parameters that can only be studied using Computational Fluid Dynamics (CFD). Thus, a CFD model has been implemented with a 2D axisymmetric geometry and the standard k-ε model to solve the Favre-averaged Navier-Stokes equations. An experimental ejector has been used to validate the CFD model, obtaining a very good agreement between experimental results and the model.

Finally, a parametric study has been done to find the optimum geometrical parameters for the ejector to be implemented in the Test Station.

Keywords: PEM, Fuel Cell, Ejector, Hydrogen, Recirculation, Compressible Flow, CFD.

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1. Introduction

The continuous and exponential increase in energy demand makes it necessary to develop alternative energy production methods that can substitute fossil fuels. The fact that the availability of these fuels is finite and that they have a harmful effect over the environment makes mandatory the investigation of new and more sustainable energy sources.

A good alternative to replace fossil fuels is hydrogen. Hydrogen provides higher efficiency than fossil fuels and is environmentally friendly. A high advantage of hydrogen is that it is fully recyclable since it produces water that can be used as the raw material for hydrogen generation. Moreover, it can be used to produce energy by several different ways: by burning it, using it in a combustion engine or producing electricity through fuel cells.

When properly designed, fuel cell systems can be a reliable and durable method to produce efficient and environmentally friendly energy for different applications. Amongst the various fuel cell technologies, Proton Exchange Membrane (PEM) fuel cells are considered the best candidate to replace the combustion engine because of their capability of high power densities, relatively high efficiency, low operating temperatures, quick start up, zero pollution and relatively long lifetime [1]. For the last years, significant progress has been made in means of achieving the optimum balance of cost, efficiency and durability. Fuel lifetime requirements vary significantly, ranging from 3 000 to 40 000 operating hours. In order to optimize the lifetime and efficiency of a PEM fuel cell, several conditions must be taken into account. Some of them are: reactant flow rates and composition, operating and environmental temperature and pressure, humidification levels, peak load requirements and required rate of transient responses [2].

A very important issue that has to be studied to improve the efficiency of a PEM fuel cell system is the management of the hydrogen feeding procedure. Two different designs can be considered: The dead-end mode and the flow-through mode. In the dead-end mode, the amount of hydrogen provided to the fuel cell stack is equal to the amount consumed by the fuel cell. This procedure leads to accumulation of impurities and water, fuel starvation and catalyst poisoning that makes it necessary to purge the anode with nitrogen. In the flow-through mode, the amount of hydrogen provided to the fuel cell stack is larger than the amount consumed by the fuel cell. An excessive ratio of hydrogen has positive effects: It improves efficiency, helps to maintain the pressure difference between anode and cathode provides better water management, increases the lifetime of the membrane and reduces the response time to an increased power demand. However, unconsumed hydrogen means a waste of energy, decreasing the efficiency of the system. Thus, hydrogen must be recirculated.

Hydrogen recirculation systems can be designed using either a compressor or an ejector. Compressors can work

for a wide range of flow rates, but they require energy, need maintenance and usually use lubricants that can produce catalyst poisoning. Ejectors are more suited for PEM fuel cells: they have no moving parts, need almost no maintenance and have a very simple mechanical structure. Ejectors use the energy of the hydrogen which is stored in a high pressurized tank to recirculate the anodic exhaust, so they have no parasitic power.

In this paper, a Computational Fluid Dynamics model is proposed to study the fluid within an ejector and then used to design an ejector that will be used in the future as the core of an ejector based hydrogen recirculation system for an experimental PEM Fuel Cell.

2. Ejectors

Ejectors are devices used to induce a secondary flow by momentum and energy transfer from a high velocity primary jet [3]. They are used for a wide range of applications, especially in industrial refrigeration, vacuum generation and fluid recirculation.

The geometry of ejectors is composed by 4 main sections (Fig. 1): primary nozzle, suction chamber, mixing chamber and diffuser. The primary or motive stream, which is a high-pressure flow, enters to the nozzle and accelerates to subsonic speed (subcritical mode) or to sonic speed (critical mode). If the primary pressure is high enough, the flow reaches the sonic condition at the throat and expands outside the nozzle until its pressure reaches the pressure of the secondary stream.

The suction section is a chamber where the secondary flow can reach a condition near stagnation. The secondary stream enters through the suction inlet and it decelerates and increases its pressure inside the suction chamber. Then it is accelerated to the mixing chamber due to the low pressure reached by the main stream outside the nozzle and shear stress interaction in the mixing between both flows.

The mixing chamber is where both flows mix. It is usually a constant area section, but can have a converging section at the inlet. The mixing between both flows is very complex and hard to analyse. They do not mix until they reach a point inside the constant-area section, and the expansion of the main stream outside the nozzle reduces the area of the secondary stream [4]. When the main pressure is high enough, a secondary throat appears and secondary flow is choked before the mixing.
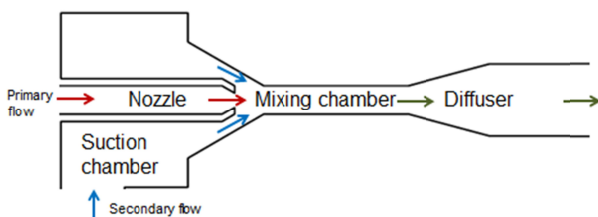

Fig. 1- Ejector

Ejectors usually have a diffuser at the outlet to bring the flow back to stagnation and recover pressure. The mixing chamber must be long enough to allow the mixing of both flows and to reduce the velocity to a subsonic condition. If supersonic flow reaches the diffuser, a normal shock wave will appear reducing the performance and the pressure obtained at the outlet. However, if the constant-area section is too long, the performance of the ejector will decrease due to friction in the mixing chamber.

The analysis of ejectors is complex, especially due to the mixing of both flows in the mixing chamber. The behaviour of the flow inside the nozzle and the diffuser can be explained using 1-D compressible flow analysis. However, 1D models usually fail when evaluating the mixing process and CFD is needed to analyse the behaviour of both flows inside the mixing chamber.

2.1. Geometrical parameters

The performance of an ejector for a given working conditions depends on several geometrical parameters. The two most important geometrical parameters are the throat area and the area of the mixing chamber. These areas have a great effect upon the mass flows and temperatures and pressures obtained inside the ejector. When the primary stream reaches supersonic conditions, no information can travel upstream the nozzle and the mass flow will only depend on the stagnation values of pressure and temperature of the primary flow and the area of the throat [5][6].

The secondary mass flow (or recirculation mass flow) will depend on the primary mass flow and its conditions outside the nozzle (especially its pressure and Mach number) and the area of the mixing chamber. When the primary stagnation pressure is high enough, the mixing chamber is choked and the mass flow depends on the stagnation properties of both flows and the area of the mixing chamber.

Other important geometrical parameters are the constant-area section length, the distance between the outlet of the nozzle and the inlet of the mixing chamber, the length and angle of the diffuser, the angle of the converging part of the mixing chamber and the angle of the diffuser. Due to the complex nature of ejectors, there is no fixed optimum value for these parameters that can meet all the possible operating conditions. However, there are some ranges of values which are known to usually give higher performance in terms of recirculation [7] [8] [9] [10] [11].

3. CFD model.

The model proposed in this work solves the problem of the ejector using an axisymmetric 2D geometry (Fig. 2). As the density of the fluid is variable along the ejector, the Favre averaged Navier-Stokes equations are used [12]. These equations are approximated using the standard k-ε turbulence model and assuming that the fluid follows the ideal gas law [5]. The thermodynamics and transport properties for the gas are held constant [13]. Wall functions are used in order to approximate the

behaviour of the flow near the walls without adding the need of more computational resources. The model has been implemented using the software COMSOL Multiphysics.

Since this is a highly convective problem, the governing equations are not stable and it is harder to achieve convergence than for conduction-dominated problems because the numerical solutions of the transport equations can exhibit oscillations and instabilities. In order to ensure the convergence of the model and obtain numerical stability it is necessary to use different stabilization methods [5].

The boundary conditions are the following:

- Primary inlet: The inlets are described using a plane wave analysis of the inviscid part of the flow [14]. The full flow condition at the inlet is specified by the stagnation values of the pressure (P_{p0}) and temperature (T_{p0}) of the flow, which are measured at Mach Number Ma=0, and the values of the turbulent kinetic energy (k) and the turbulent dissipation rate (ε). Since there is no information about the values of k and ε at the inlet, an approximation for the inlet distribution of these variables can be obtained from the turbulence intensity (I_T) and the turbulence length scale (L_T) [5]. In this work, $I_T = 5\%$ and L_T is assumed to be 0.07 times the radius of the inlet.

- Secondary inlet: The same as for the primary inlet but using the stagnation values of the secondary flow (P_{s0} and T_{s0}).

- Walls: The flow near the walls is approximated by wall functions. The boundary condition for the velocity is a non-slip condition. The turbulent kinetic energy is subjected to a homogeneous Neumann condition and the boundary conditions for ε are based on wall functions [5]. The walls are assumed to be thermally insulated.

- Axisymmetric axis.

- Outlet: The flow at the outlet is assumed to be subsonic. The back pressure (P_b) is specified. k and ε are subjected to a homogenous Neumann condition and the outlet is assumed to be thermally insulated.
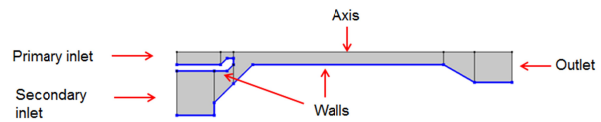

Fig. 2- Geometry of the model

Fig. 3- Boundary conditions

4. Experimental validation.

The CFD model has been validated experimentally in order to demonstrate that it is capable of predicting the mass flows and stoichiometry obtained by the ejector under different pressure conditions. This experimental validation was carried out manufacturing an ejector and testing it with air. The geometry of the ejector used in the experimental validation of the model was designed and fabricated taking into account that another ejector will have to be manufactured to be used in the experimental Test Station. Thus, it was designed to be modular and to be able to change its performance without having to manufacture a whole ejector again.

This ejector is composed of 5 different manufactured pieces, 3 O-rings to seal and 3 connectors (Fig. 4). The nozzle is divided into two different pieces: The nozzle itself and the nozzle support. Both pieces are connected using an M5 thread. This division was done in order to avoid the drilling of a long hole and to be able to change the nozzle without having to manufacture the whole piece again. The nozzle support and the body are connected using an M18 thread, and the nozzle support is connected to the connector using a ¼'' NPT thread. A hexagonal nut with an M18 thread is used to change the distance between the inlet of the mixing chamber and the nozzle.

The mixing chamber and the diffuser were fabricated together as a whole piece. This piece is connected to the connector using a ¼'' NPT thread, and a M18 thread is used to connect it to the body.
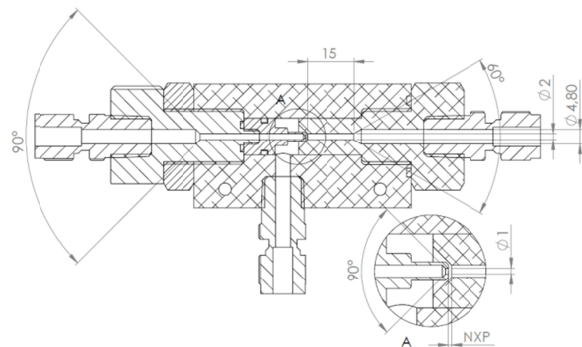

Fig. 4- Parts of the experimental ejector

Fig. 5- Sectional view of the ejector with some of its dimensions

The dimensions of some of the most important geometric parameters of the ejector are shown in Fig. 5.

4.1. Experimental set-up.

The set-up used to test the experimental ejector is depicted in Fig. 6. It is composed of mass-flow and pressure controllers and sensors to measure temperatures, mass-flows and pressures. Both the pressure and temperature at the inlets and outlet of the ejector can be controlled and measured.
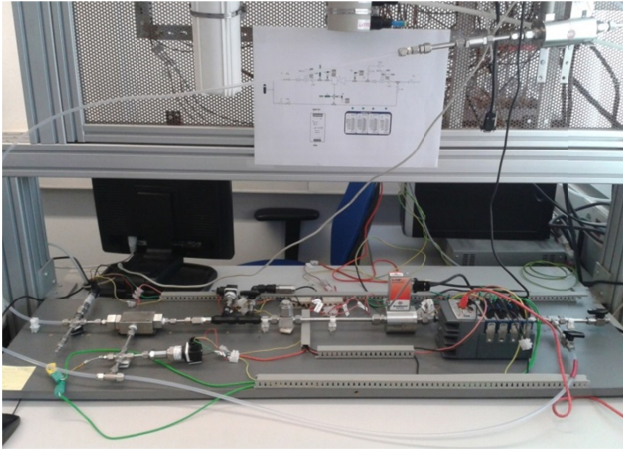

Fig. 6- Experimental set-up.

4.2. Results of the experimental validation.

The ejector was tested for different pressure conditions and nozzle positions. In all the experiments done, the secondary pressure was controlled to be equal to the back pressure. The Nozzle positions (NXP) studied with $P_b=P_{s0}=1.2$ bar$_{abs}$ were 1.5 mm, 2.5 mm and 3.5 mm. NXP=1.5 mm was also used to work with $P_b=P_{s0}=1.5$ bar$_{abs}$.

The results obtained are depicted in Fig. 7, Fig. 8, Fig. 9 and Fig. 10. As is shown in the figures, there is a very good agreement between the mass flows obtained with the model and the experimental results.
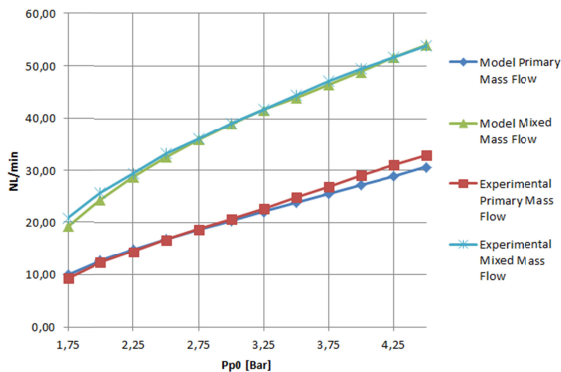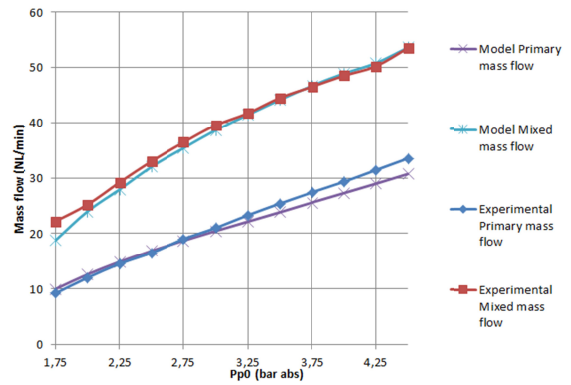

Fig. 7- NXP=1.5 mm, P_{p0}=1.2 bar$_{abs}$
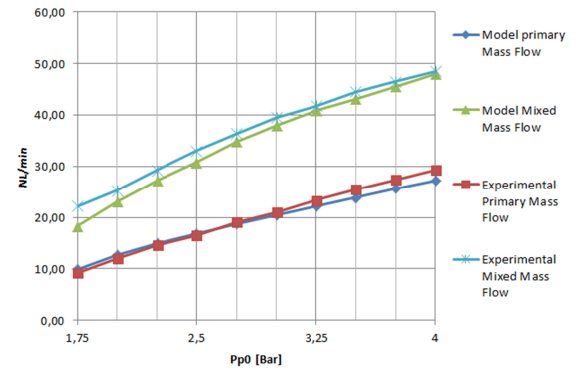

Fig. 8- NPX=2.5 mm, P_{p0}=1.2 bar$_{abs}$
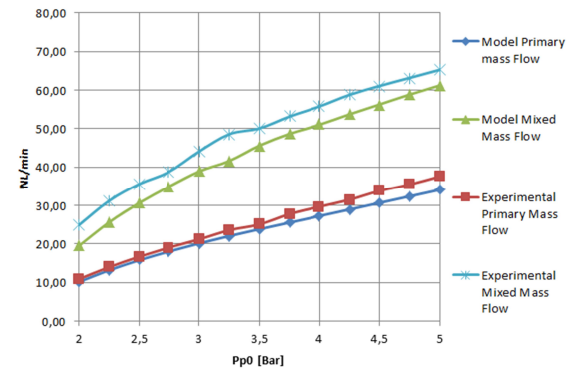

Fig. 9-NXP=3.5 mm, P_{p0}=1.2 bar$_{abs}$

Fig. 10-NXP=1.5 mm, P_{p0}=1.5 bar$_{abs}$

5. Experimental Test Station.

The experimental Test Station where the final ejector will be placed is composed of different sections: Fuel Cell stack, hydrogen and air pipelines, a cooling system and a programmable external load. The PEM Fuel Cell stack is the model BZ100 built by UBzM. It consists of 20 cells with 100 cm^2 and provides a power of 600 W with a single cell voltage of 0.6 V. The recommended temperature is 55ºC and the pressure should be near atmospheric pressure, with a maximum difference of 0.5 bar between cathode and anode.

A very important parameter is the stoichiometry, which is the relation between the flow of fuel supplied to the fuel cell and the amount of fuel consumed:

$$S_{H_2} = \frac{\dot{m}_{H_2\,supplied}}{\dot{m}_{H_2\,consumed}}$$

Eq. 1

In the fuel cell stack, hydrogen flow rate ranges from 1 to $20 \frac{NL}{min}$ with a maximum pressure of 1.5 bar_{abs} and a maximum stoichiometry equal to 3. Air flow rate ranges from 4 to $116 \frac{NL}{min}$ with a maximum pressure of 1.6 bar_{abs} and a stoichiometry between 2.5 and 5.

The pressure at the inlet of the Hydrogen line can reach up to 7 bar_{abs}; however, it is better to design an ejector that provides $20 \frac{NL}{min}$ for a primary pressure of 4.5 bar_{abs}.

6. Final ejector.

The final geometry of the ejector used in the Hydrogen Recirculation System for the experimental Test Station has been obtained by carrying out a parametrical study beginning with the geometrical parameters of the experimental ejector (Fig. 5). The objective is to obtain an ejector that can work under the working conditions of the station and provide a maximum stoichiometry of 3 for a primary flow of H_2 up to $20 \frac{NL}{min}$. The geometrical parameters of the final ejector are selected in the following order:

1. Diameter of the nozzle: The diameter of the nozzle defines the primary mass flow for a given value of pressure and temperature. The diameter that provides the desired primary mass flow is $D_t = 0.4$ mm.

2. Diameter of the mixing chamber: This parameters has an strong effect over the amount of recirculation obtained for a given primary mass flow and pressure conditions. The optimum diameter of the mixing chamber for the purposes of this work is 1.2 mm.

3. Length of the mixing chamber: This parameter affects the amount of recirculation obtained, especially for low values of primary pressure. The optimum value of the length of the mixing chamber for the given working conditions is four times the diameter of the mixing chamber ($L_m = 4.8$ mm).

4. Nozzle position: The effect of this parameter over the amount of recirculation obtained is lower than for the diameter and length of the mixing chamber. For this ejector, a nozzle position equal to 1.5 mm has been selected as the optimum value. However, different Nozzle positions can be used due to the modularity of the selected geometry.

The dimensions of the ejector for the experimental Test Station are depicted in Fig. 11. The stoichiometry and mass flows obtained for the working conditions of the station are depicted in Fig. 12. As can be seen, the primary mass flow ranges from 0 to $20 \frac{NL}{min}$ for a primary

pressure ranging from 1 to 4.5 bar_{abs}, while the stoichiometry ranges from 2.3 to 2.9.
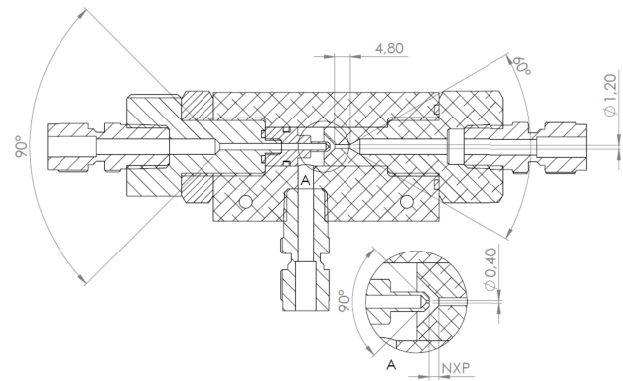

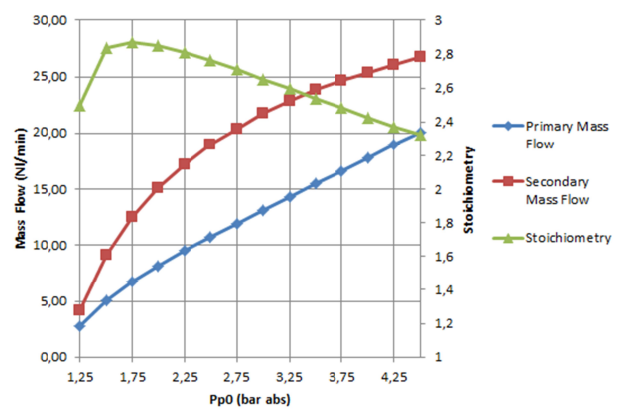**Fig. 11**- Sectional view of the ejector designed for TS4 and some of its dimensions

Fig. 12- Stoichiometry and mass flows obtained with the selected geometrical parameters

7. Conclusions.

In this work, an experimental ejector to be used in a H_2 recirculation system for a PEM fuel cell station has been designed. In order to do that, a CFD model which solves for the Favre-averaged Navier Stokes equations approximated by the standard k- ε turbulence model has been implemented.

The model has been validated experimentally using an experimental ejector. This ejector has a modular design in order to be used later in the Test Station only changing some of its parts. This modular design is very interesting in terms of research because it allows the possibility of testing different geometries manufacturing just one ejector.

After the experimental validation, the model has been used to design the desired ejector. The more important geometrical parameters which have been selected are: diameter of the throat $D_t = 0.4$ mm, diameter of the mixing chamber $D_m = 1.2$ mm, length of the mixing chamber $L_m = 4.8$ mm and nozzle position NXP=1.5 mm. This ejector can provide a maximum stoichiometry of 2.9 for a primary mass flow ranging from 0 to $20 \frac{NL}{min}$

for the pressure and temperature conditions of the experimental Test Station.

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