

Application Area: Energy

Fuel Cells

Part 2 – Types of Fuel Cells

Keywords

Fuel cell; Energy

Summary

In the previous application note, the principle of a fuel cell was described and some of the challenges in their application as a viable technology were discussed. To overcome the various technical challenges, many different types of fuel cells have been developed. In this application note, proton exchange membrane, direct methanol and solid oxide fuel cells are discussed in more detail.

Proton Exchange Membrane Fuel Cell (PEMFC)

Proton exchange membrane fuel cell is also known as the Polymer Electrolyte Membrane Fuel Cell. In this type of fuel cell, a thin conductive plastic sheet (proton conducting membrane or a conducting polymer, such as perfluorosulphonic acid polymer) is used as the electrolyte. The electrolyte is sandwiched between two porous electrodes impregnated with an active catalysts (a highly dispersed metal alloy particles, typically platinum based). The back of the electrodes are coated with a hydrophobic compound, such as Teflon, which provides a gas diffusion path to the catalyst layer.

Within the cell, the following electrochemical reactions take place:

Anode reaction ($E_{anode}^0 = 0 V$ vs. SHE):



Cathode reaction ($E_{catho}^0 = 1.23 V$ vs. SHE):



Overall reaction: ($E_{cell}^0 = 1.23 V$)



The protons, produced at the anode, will solvate with water molecules and diffuse through the membrane to the cathode.

PEMFC operates on hydrogen and, if a hydrocarbon such as natural gas is used as a fuel, it needs to be reformed to H_2 by the following reactions:



The Pt catalyst at the anode can tolerate only a few ppm of CO at its operating temperature (80 °C). To prevent electrode poisoning, the unconverted CO needs to be removed down to concentrations below 10 ppm before introducing it in the fuel cell.

PEMFC system advantages:

- Operation at high current densities
- Ability to start very quickly.
- Compact and light weight design.
- No corrosive fluid spillage hazard as the only liquid present in the cell is water.

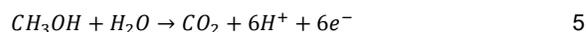
PEMFC system challenges:

- CO tolerance of the anode.
- Improvement in cathode kinetics.
- Need for higher temperature membranes.
- Cheaper membranes and membrane electrode assemblies.

Direct Methanol Fuel Cell (DMFC)

These cells resemble the PEM cells as both use a polymer membrane as electrolyte. However, in the DMFC, liquid methanol is oxidized to form protons, eliminating the need for a fuel reformer.

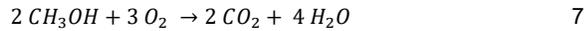
Anode reaction:



Cathode reaction:



Overall reaction:



DMFC can typically operate in a temperature range of 50 °C – 100 °C, making it attractive for small to mid-sized applications.

One of the main challenges in the commercial application of the DMFC is the slow kinetics of the methanol oxidation reaction resulting a relatively low performance compared to the hydrogen fuelled PEMFC.

Another challenge is the methanol crossover. The methanol permeates through the polymer membrane to the cathode where it gets oxidized and results in reducing the cathode potential. This occurs because the cathode catalyst, typically Pt, is electro-active to methanol oxidation.

Direct Methanol System advantages:

- Liquid fuel results in high storage efficiency.

Direct Methanol System challenges:

- Improvement in methanol oxidation kinetics.
- Improvement in cathode kinetics.
- Higher temperature membranes with lower crossover.

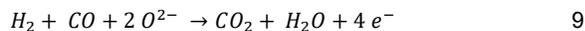
Solid Oxide Fuel Cell (SOFC)

The solid oxide fuel cells or SOFCs are used in high-power applications such as large electricity generating stations.

Anode Reactions:



Combined Anode Reaction:



Cathode Reaction:



Overall Reaction:



In a SOFC, a hard ceramic material is used as electrolyte, allowing operating temperatures up to 1000 °C. The electrolyte consists of a solid, nonporous metal oxide, typically Y₂O₃ stabilized ZrO₂. The anode is made of CoZrO₂ or NiZrO₂. The cathode is made of Sr doped LaMnO₃. The cell operates between 650 °C to 1000 °C, enabling the conduction of oxygen ions through the electrolyte.

CO and hydrocarbons such as CH₄ can also be used as fuels in an SOFC. Because of the high temperatures within the cell, the water-gas shift reaction and the steam-reforming reaction will become possible:



The resulting H₂ is easily oxidized at the anode.

SOFC advantages:

- Because of the solid state components, the SOFC can be, in principle constructed in any configuration.
- No liquid electrolytes will eliminate the corrosion and electrolyte management problems.
- Internal reforming can be achieved due to operating temperature greater 600 °C.
- High temperatures (1000 °C) exhaust heat from the SOFC can be used for the generation of steam for cogeneration purposes.
- The high temperature helps to achieve fast reaction kinetics without requiring any precious materials.

SOFC system challenges:

- The high temperature of the SOFC places stringent requirements on the materials of construction.
- The materials that can be used in the SOFC need to be chemically stable in extreme oxidizing and/or reducing conditions. They also require good thermo-mechanical properties at high temperatures.
- The cell components must be capable of withstanding thermal cycling.

Error! Reference source not found. Table 1 provides a summary of the most important properties of the different types of fuel cells.

Table 1– Comparison table of common fuel cell types.

Type	Fuel	Charge carrying ion	Operating temperature (°C)
Alkaline (AFC)	H ₂ (pure)	OH ⁻	50-200
Polymer electrolyte (PEMFC)	H ₂	H ⁺	30-100
Direct methanol (DMFC)	CH ₃ OH	H ⁺	20-90
Phosphoric acid (PAFC)	H ₂	H ⁺	220
Molten carbonate (MCFC)	CH ₄ , H ₂ , CO	CO ₃ ²⁻	650
Solid oxide (SOFC)	CH ₄ , H ₂ , CO	O ²⁻	500-1000

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For more information

Additional information about this application note and the associated NOVA software procedure is available from your local [Metrohm distributor](#). Additional instrument specification information can be found at www.metrohm.com/en/products/electrochemistry.