



2015 International Conference on Alternative Energy in Developing Countries and Emerging Economies

Experimental Investigation of Al₂O₃ - Water Ethylene Glycol Mixture Nanofluid Thermal Behaviour in a Single Cooling Plate for PEM Fuel Cell Application

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Abstract

Thermal enhancement through application of nanofluid coolant in a single cooling plate of Proton Exchange Membrane (PEM) fuel cell was experimentally investigated in this paper. The study focuses on low concentration of Al₂O₃ dispersed in Water - Ethylene Glycol mixtures as coolant in a carbon graphite PEM fuel cell cooling plate. The study was conducted in a cooling plate size of 220mm x 300mm with 22 parallel mini channels and large fluid distributors. The mini channel dimensions are 100mm x 1mm x 5 mm. A constant heat load of 100W was applied by a heater pad that represents the artificial heat load of a single cell. Al₂O₃ nanoparticle used was 0.1 and 0.5 vol % concentration which was then dispersed in 50:50 (water: Ethylene Glycol) mixture. The effect of different flow rates to heat transfer enhancement and fluid flow represented in Re number range of 20 to 120 was observed. Heat transfer was improved up to 13.87% for 0.5 vol % Al₂O₃ as compared to the base fluid. However the pressure drop also increase which result in pumping power increment up to 0.02W. The positive thermal results implied that Al₂O₃ nanofluid is a potential candidate for future applications in PEM fuel cell thermal management.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of 2015 AEDCEE

Keywords: mini channel; nanofluid; heat transfer; PEMFC; fluid flow

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1. Introduction

Effective cooling is crucial for a safer and more efficient operation of proton exchange membrane fuel cell (PEM) fuel cell especially when dealing with higher power of fuel cell stack. An effective thermal management of a fuel cell gives a better performance of a (PEM) fuel cell as high temperatures can result in membrane degradation while low temperatures will lower the kinetic reaction and sometimes causing flooding issue [1-3]. Mini channels have been adopted in PEM fuel cell cooling plate designs as it allows a more compact stack size and allows improved heat transfer rates that leads to lower maximum cell temperature [4-6].

In addition to miniaturization of channel dimension, nanofluid is also seen as one of the alternative coolant for PEMFC due to its higher value of heat transfer coefficient as compared to base fluid [7]. Nanofluid in mini channels has been experimentally investigated mostly for electronic heat sink and automotive heat exchangers [4, 8-10]. Nanofluid cooling effects at different nanoparticle fractions to variations in heat sink channel designs, operation and materials are normally reported. Naphon and Nakharinr [9] studied TiO₂ in de-ionized water nanofluid heat transfer characteristic by varying three different channel heights. Sohail et al [11] studied the effect of different flow rates to thermal performance of Al₂O₃ in water at volume fractions range of 0.1 to 0.25 %. Both studies reported an enhancement of 42.3% and 11% of max convective heat transfer respectively as compared to base fluids. Apart from adoption in mini channel heat sink, nanofluid in an electrically active heat transfer environment such as fuel cell mini channel is a potential area to be explored. However, information on electrical conductivity of nanofluid is still insufficient as compared to other thermo physical properties of nanofluids. Zakaria et al. [12] has established a thermo-electrical conductivity ratio for Al₂O₃ nanofluid in water:EG mixture for (PEM) fuel cell. According to the findings, Al₂O₃ in 50:50 (water: EG) is one of the potential base fluid as it meets both thermal and electrical characteristic required for PEMFC. Sarojini et al. [13] experimented nanoparticles of Al₂O₃, CuO and Cu in distilled water and EG and report that electrical conductivity increases as the volume concentration increase.

In this study, a customized test bench was developed to represent the working conditions of a PEM fuel cell cooling plate. The thermal effects in applying nanofluid on heat transfer and fluid flow on graphite mini channel was investigated for base fluid, 0.1 and 0.5 vol % Al₂O₃ in 50:50 (water: EG) mixture. The experimental was conducted under constant heat flux and inlet Reynolds number range between 20 to 120. The 50:50 (water:EG) ratio was selected due to its compliance to previous TEC ratio [12].

2. Methodology

2.1. Nanofluid thermo physical properties measurement

Thermo physical properties such as thermal conductivity and viscosity of nanofluids were measured at temperature of 27°C. Thermal conductivity of nanofluid was measured using KD2 Pro thermal property analyzer of Decagon Devices, Inc., USA while viscosity was measured using Brookfield LVDV-III Ultra rheometer

The density of nanofluid is calculated using Pak and Cho [14] using Equation (1) :

$$\rho_{nf} = (1 - \phi)\rho_f + \phi\rho_p \quad (1)$$

Specific heat is calculated using model from Xuan and Roetzel [15] using Equation (2) :

$$C_{nf} = \frac{(1-\phi)(\rho C)_f + \phi(\rho C)_p}{(1-\phi)\rho_f + \phi\rho_p} \quad (2)$$

Table 1: Properties of nanoparticles and base fluid used in the experiment

Nano particle / Base fluid	Thermal conductivity (κ , W/m.K)	Specific Heat Cp, (J/kg.K)	Viscosity μ , (mPa.s)	Density ρ , (kg/m ³)	Reference
Al ₂ O ₃	36	765	-	4000	[14, 16-18]
Distilled water	0.615	4180	0.854	999	[16, 17, 19-21]
Water : EG (50:50)	0.3712	3354	3.21	1110	

where ϕ is referred as particle volume fraction and subscripts f, p and nf referred to fluid, particle and nanofluid. Properties measured and calculated were tabulated in Table 1.

2.2. PEMFC Single cooling plate experimental set up

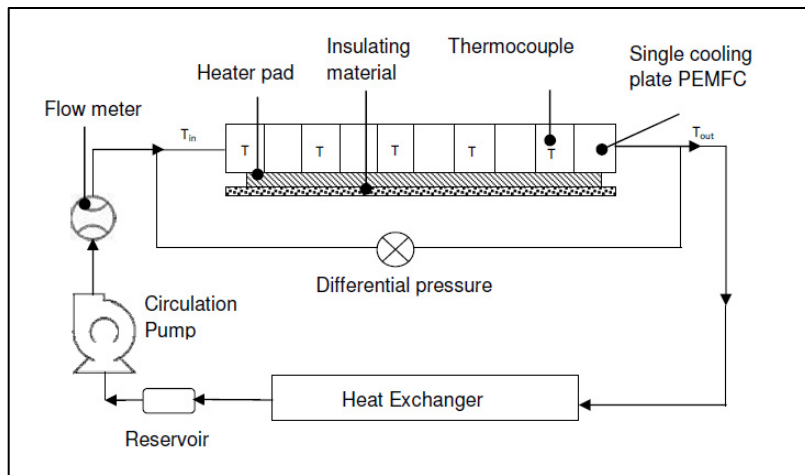


Fig. 1. Experimental set up of single cooling plate PEMFC

Carbon graphite plate of was used to mimic a single cooling plate of a PEMFC. The plate consists of 22 parallel mini channels with dimensions of 5mm x 1mm x 100 mm . The plate was then subjected to a constant heat load of 100 W and insulated with fibre glass insulator material to minimize the heat loss to

the surrounding. Temperature of both fluid and plate were measured using K-type thermocouples. Differential pressure used to measure the pressure difference between inlet and outlet of fluid. A volumetric flow meter was also installed to measure the volumetric flow rate of nanofluids. All experimental data were taken using a dedicated data logger as the data acquisition system.

2.3. Mathematical model

Plate temperature of the cooling plate is calculated using Equation (3) where base height effect is considered [9].

$$T_b = T_{ave} + \frac{q_{in}H_b}{k_{cooling\ plate}A_b} \quad (3)$$

Where cooling plate base area is defined as in Equation (4)

$$A_b = L_{ch}N(W_{ch} + W_{fin}) \quad (4)$$

The convective heat transfer performance based on constant surface heat flux condition can be determined from Equation (5)

$$\bar{h} = \frac{q_s}{T_b - T_m} \quad (5)$$

A dimensionless Nusselt number which evaluate the proportionality of convective heat transfer to the conductive heat transfer is calculated from Equation (6).

$$\overline{Nu} = \frac{\bar{h}D_h}{k_{nf}} \quad (6)$$

Pumping power is estimated using Equation (7) :

$$W_p = \dot{Q} \times \Delta P \quad (7)$$

3. Result and discussion

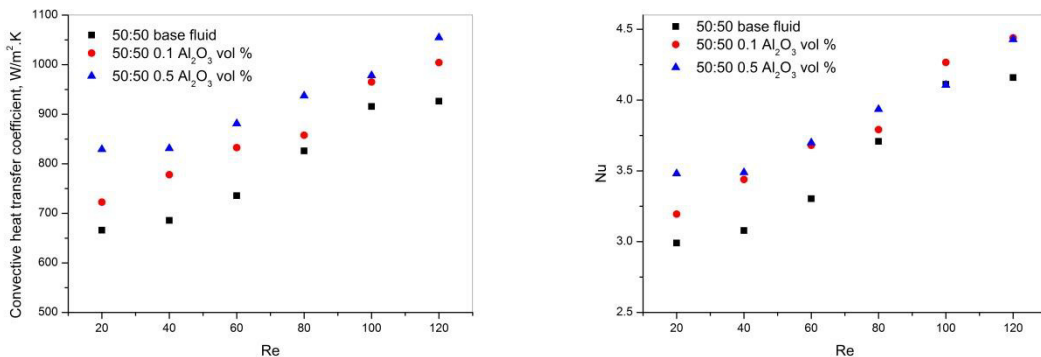


Fig. 2. (a) Variation of convective heat transfer coefficient against Reynold number; (b) Effect of nanofluid to Nusselt number against Reynold number

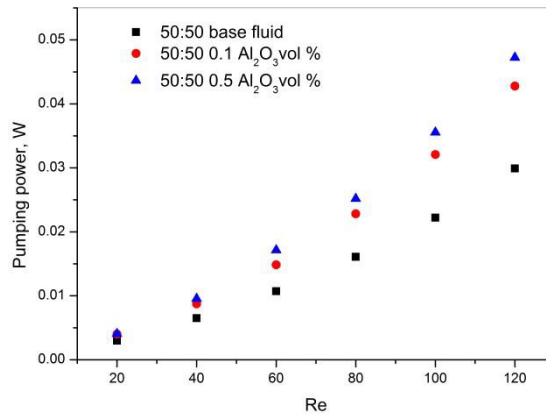


Fig. 3. Effect of pumping power with nanofluid application

Thermal performance of nanofluids is evaluated based on the convective heat transfer coefficient and Nusselt number. The convective heat transfer increased as both vol % concentration and Re number increased. The highest increment is at 0.5 vol% concentration with 15.2% of enhancement compared to the base fluid at Re 120. The higher thermal conductivity of nanofluid as compared to base fluid is the main reason for the enhancement. The increase of vol % concentration has eventually increased the thermal conductivity and the Brownian motion which has improved the heat transfer coefficient. The heat transfer coefficient is then converted to a non dimensionalized Nu number. The Nu number is 7.7% higher for 0.5 vol% concentration at Re 120 as compared to base fluid. Convective heat transfer coefficient and Nu number are illustrated in **Figure 2 (a)** and **(b)** consecutively.

Fluid flow of nanofluid in mini channel was evaluated with the pressure drop measurement between inlet and outlet fluid. High pressure drop was expected as the coolant has been forced to pass through a narrow channel of cooling plate PEMFC. The increase in pressure drop eventually has increased the additional pumping power required in order to move a more viscous and a higher density of nanofluid. Highest pumping power is measured at 0.5 vol% concentration at Re 120 which is an additional of 0.02W as compared to the base fluid which is equivalent to 58% increment as shown in Figure 3.

4. Conclusion

In this experimental work, heat transfer and fluid flow performance of Al₂O₃ in base fluid of 50:50 (water:EG) in a single cooling plate of PEMFC cooling plate are presented. The findings show that there is an enhancement in heat transfer performance with Al₂O₃ in 50:50 (water:EG) as compared to the base fluid of 50:50 (water:EG). This enhancement is represented by improvement in both convective heat transfer coefficient and Nu number. However, the pumping power increase for a single plate is relatively small compared to the heat transfer enhancement and can be neglected. The effect of high electrical conductivity to an actual fuel cell operation is the main concern and a correlation on cooling rate improvement to electrical power loss is currently being investigated.

Acknowledgment

The author would like to thank Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) for financial supports given under 600-RMI/ERGS 5/3 (32/2013).

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