

The influence of H₂S on plasma catalysis and the conversion of CH₄ and CO₂ in a dielectric barrier discharge reactor for biogas reforming into syngas

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ABSTRACT

Biogas is a type of sustainable energy produced by the anaerobic decomposition of organic matter derived from plants and animals. Biogas comprises significant quantities of CH₄, CO₂, and minor concentrations of H₂S. The substance is naturally introduced into the surrounding ecosystem, with its composition exhibiting variability contingent upon its origin. The biogas reforming process was conducted in a DBD-NTP reactor, using catalysts to enhance the total reaction efficiency under ambient circumstances. Fe/ γ -Al₂O₃, Co/ γ -Al₂O₃, and Ni/ γ -Al₂O₃ catalysts were synthesized by the wet impregnation method and reduced the catalyst with H₂ gas in a tubular furnace. Synthesized catalysts were analyzed by XRD, BET, XPS and SEM. Prepared catalysts are integrated into a discharge zone of a DBD reactor and tested for biogas reforming reaction. The DBD plasma system produced an applied potential ranging from 16 kV to 22 kV, while maintaining a flow rate of 70 mL min⁻¹ with a gas mixture contains CH₄, CO₂, and N₂ at a ratio of 30:30:10. The experiment started with performing the reaction in the absence of H₂S, followed by reaction with the addition of 0.054% H₂S (mixed with N₂), while ensuring a consistent residence duration. The data obtained from observations suggests that H₂S exerts a substantial influence on the process of conversion. When H₂S was added, the CH₄ conversion drastically decreased from 24% (without H₂S) to 15% (with H₂S), and the CO₂ conversion decreased from 21% to 17% at 22 kV with Ni/ γ -Al₂O₃ catalyst packed DBD. H₂S also has an impact on energy efficiency and syngas ratio. Moreover, H₂S has more impact on CH₄ than CO₂.

Keywords: Biogas reforming; Energy efficiency; Syngas production; DBD plasma

NOMENCLATURE

NTP	Non-Thermal Plasma
DBD	Dielectric Barrier Discharge
BET	Brunauer-Emmett-Teller
AC	Alternating Current
SEM	Scanning Electron Microscopy
FT	Fischer-Tropsch
IPC	In-Plasma Catalysis
CB	Carbon Balance

1. INTRODUCTION

The depletion of fossil fuels and the increasing apprehension regarding environmental consequences associated with energy conversion has prompted the exploration of novel approaches using renewable energy sources. Biogas is a sustainable energy source generated through the process of anaerobic digestion, which involves the decomposition of organic matter and animal manure. Based on the source, biogas has a composition of 25-50% CO₂, 35-75% CH₄, and traces of impurities like H₂S.[1,2] A variety of methodologies have been suggested for the generation of syngas, encompassing the gasification of diverse sources such as coal, municipal solid waste, and animal waste. The generation of syngas through non-thermal plasma technology is the subject of intensive study today.[3–5] The principal advantage of NTP is in its non-equilibrium characteristic, wherein the average electron energies range from 1 to 10 eV, while the temperature of the surrounding gas stays at ambient levels.[6] Excitation of atomic and molecular species, as well as the severing of chemical bonds, may be accomplished most effectively within this electron energy range by means of electron impact dissociation, excitation, and ionization.[7] Furthermore, the integration of non-thermal plasma and catalysts, known as plasma-catalysis, exhibits considerable promise in achieving synergistic effects.[8] This approach has the capability to reduce the required operating temperature

of catalysts while simultaneously enhancing their catalytic activity and stability. Consequently, this leads to a substantial improvement in the conversion of reactants, yield and selectivity of desired products, as well as the overall energy efficiency of the process. Several non-thermal plasma sources have been utilized in biogas reforming, including dielectric barrier discharges (DBDs),[9] corona discharge,[10] and gliding arc discharge.[11] DBD has attracted growing attention as a viable method for synthesizing fuels and chemicals at low temperatures. Moreover, DBD produces a uniform discharge over the discharge volume. This is primarily due to its straightforward design and ability to be scaled up for industrial applications.

Despite extensive research on plasma-enhanced catalytic biogas reforming for syngas production, there is still a limited understanding of how to design highly efficient catalysts for this reaction. The study conducted by Kalai et al.[12] focused on the examination of biogas reforming using catalysts derived from Ni-Mg-Al hydrotalcite with Ce as promoter. The researchers emphasized that an increased Ce/Ni ratio resulted in improved stability and performance of the catalysts. Wang et al. observed that the addition of CeO₂ promoter had a positive impact on the process of plasma-catalytic biogas reforming. Nevertheless, the excessive doping of Ce led to a decrease in the quantity of active sites, accompanied by a reduction in the specific surface area. Consequently, this led to a decrease in the catalytic performance.[13]

The study conducted by Lucredio et al. aimed to examine the impact of incorporating La into a Ni-Rh/Al₂O₃ catalyst during the reforming process of a simulated sulfur-free biogas. The researchers observed that the presence of La resulted in a reduction of carbon deposition. This reduction was attributed to the promotion of gasification of carbon species.[14]

Moreover, many studies have been performed for biogas reforming reaction with model gas mixture without H₂S. The primary focus of this research is to investigate the effect of H₂S on the efficiency of plasma catalytic CH₄ and CO₂ conversion. Plasma and catalysis work well together, and this has been known for a long time. However, efforts to improve synergy and energy efficiency remain both highly desired and difficult because of the effect of poisoning the conversions of CO₂ and CH₄ and syngas ratio.

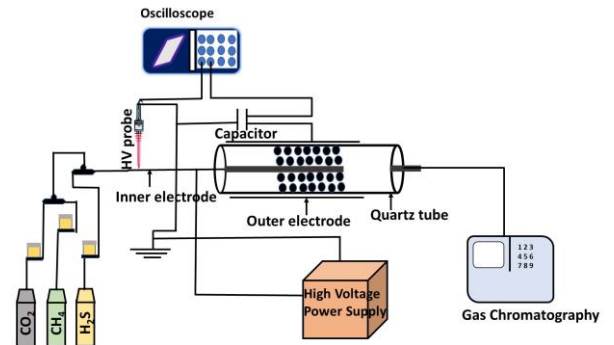


Fig. 1. Schematic diagram of experimental setup

2. EXPERIMENTAL

2.1 Experimental set-up

Fig. 1 illustrates the dielectric barrier discharge reactor employed in the process of biogas reforming. The flow rate was set to a constant value of 70 mL/min. A ground electrode is established by utilizing a quartz tube with an inner diameter of 20 mm, which is encased by a stainless-steel mesh. A high voltage electrode with a diameter of 11 mm is positioned at the center of the quartz tube to serve as the inner electrode. The resulting discharge gap measures 4.5 mm. The discharge volume of the reactor is 24 cm³ and was maintained for all the reactions. The dissipated power was determined using the Q-U Lissajous method. The experiment was initiated by conducting the reaction using CO₂, CH₄ and N₂ at flow rates of 30 mL min⁻¹, 30 mL min⁻¹, and 10 mL min⁻¹ respectively. The reaction was carried out in a DBD reactor, both with plasma alone and in the presence of a catalyst. Following that, we repeated the experiment with a 10 mL/min flow of 0.054% H₂S diluted with N₂ injected into a mixture of CH₄ and CO₂, while keeping a constant residence time.

2.2 Gas analysis and parameter definitions:

The gas mixture from the reactor outlet was subjected to analysis using gas chromatography, equipped with a thermal conductivity detector by Mayura Analytical Pvt. Ltd. The elution of the gaseous molecules was performed using Molecular Sieve 5A and HayaSep-A columns. The parameters were derived using the following equations.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{CO}_2 \text{ conversion (\%)} &= \frac{\text{converted CO}_2 \text{ (mmol/mL)}}{\text{CO}_2 \text{ input (mmol/mL)}} \times 100 \end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned} \text{CH}_4 \text{ conversion (\%)} &= \frac{\text{converted CH}_4 \text{ (mmol/mL)}}{\text{CH}_4 \text{ input (mmol/mL)}} \times 100 \end{aligned}$$

$$\text{CO selectivity (\%)} = \frac{\text{CO produced (mmol/mL)}}{[\text{CH}_4 \text{ converted} + \text{CO}_2 \text{ converted}](\text{mmol/mL})} \times 100$$

$$\text{H}_2 \text{ selectivity (\%)} = \frac{\text{H}_2 \text{ produced (mmol/mL)}}{2 \times \text{CH}_4 \text{ converted (mmol/mL)}} \times 100$$

$$\text{CB (\%)} = \frac{[\text{CH}_4 \text{ output} + \text{CO}_2 \text{ output}] + \text{CO produced (mmol/mL)}}{[\text{CH}_4 \text{ input} + \text{CO}_2 \text{ input}](\text{mmol/mL})} \times 100$$

$$\frac{\text{H}_2}{\text{CO}} = \frac{\text{H}_2 \text{ produced (mmol/mL)}}{\text{CO produced (mmol/mL)}}$$

$$\text{EE (mmol/k)} = \frac{[\text{CH}_4 \text{ converted} + \text{CO}_2 \text{ converted}]}{\text{Power (W)}} \times \frac{1000}{60}$$

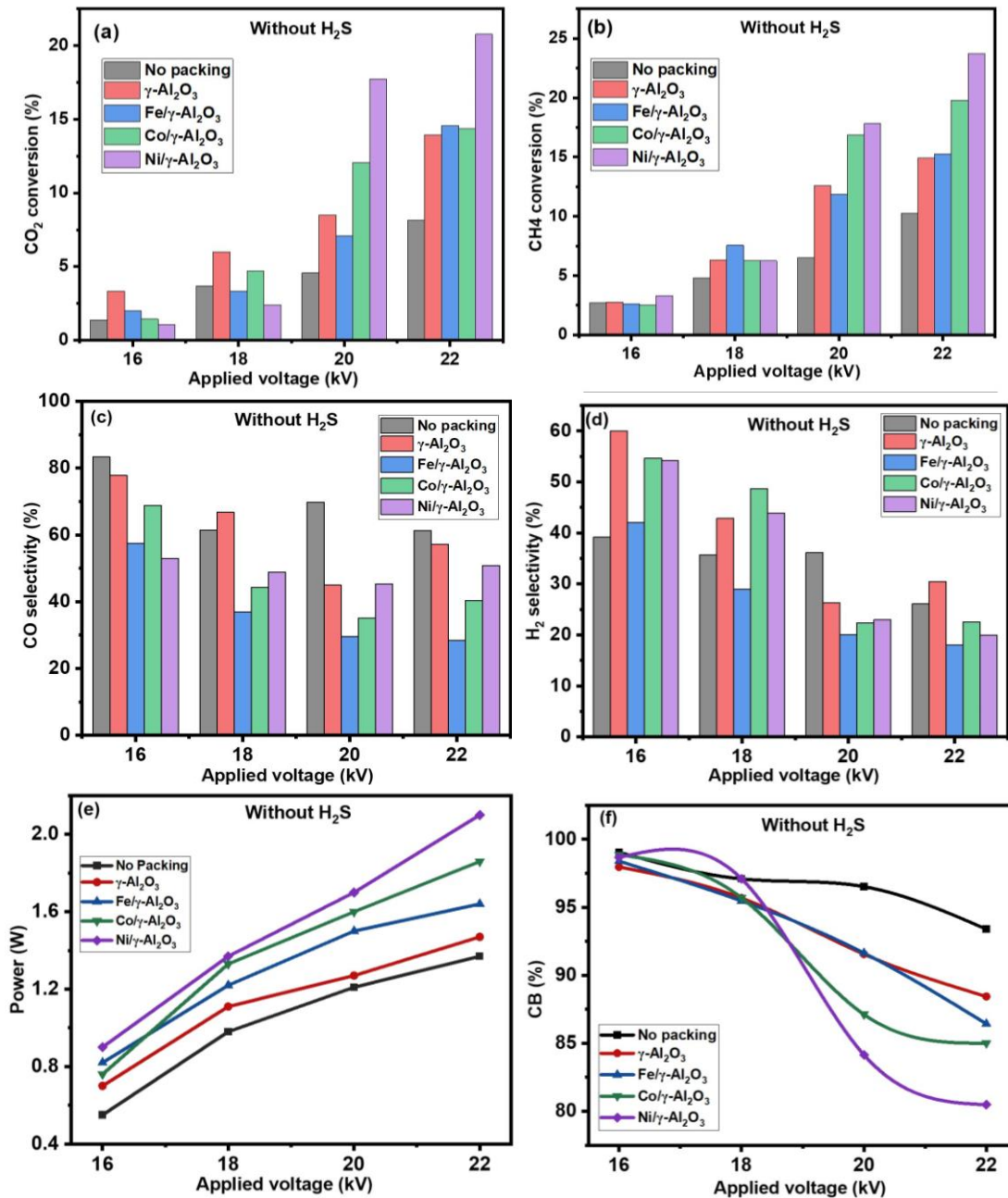


Fig. 2. (a) & (b) CO₂ and CH₄ conversion, (c) & (d) CO and H₂ selectivity, (e) & (f) power and carbon balance, plotted against applied voltage.

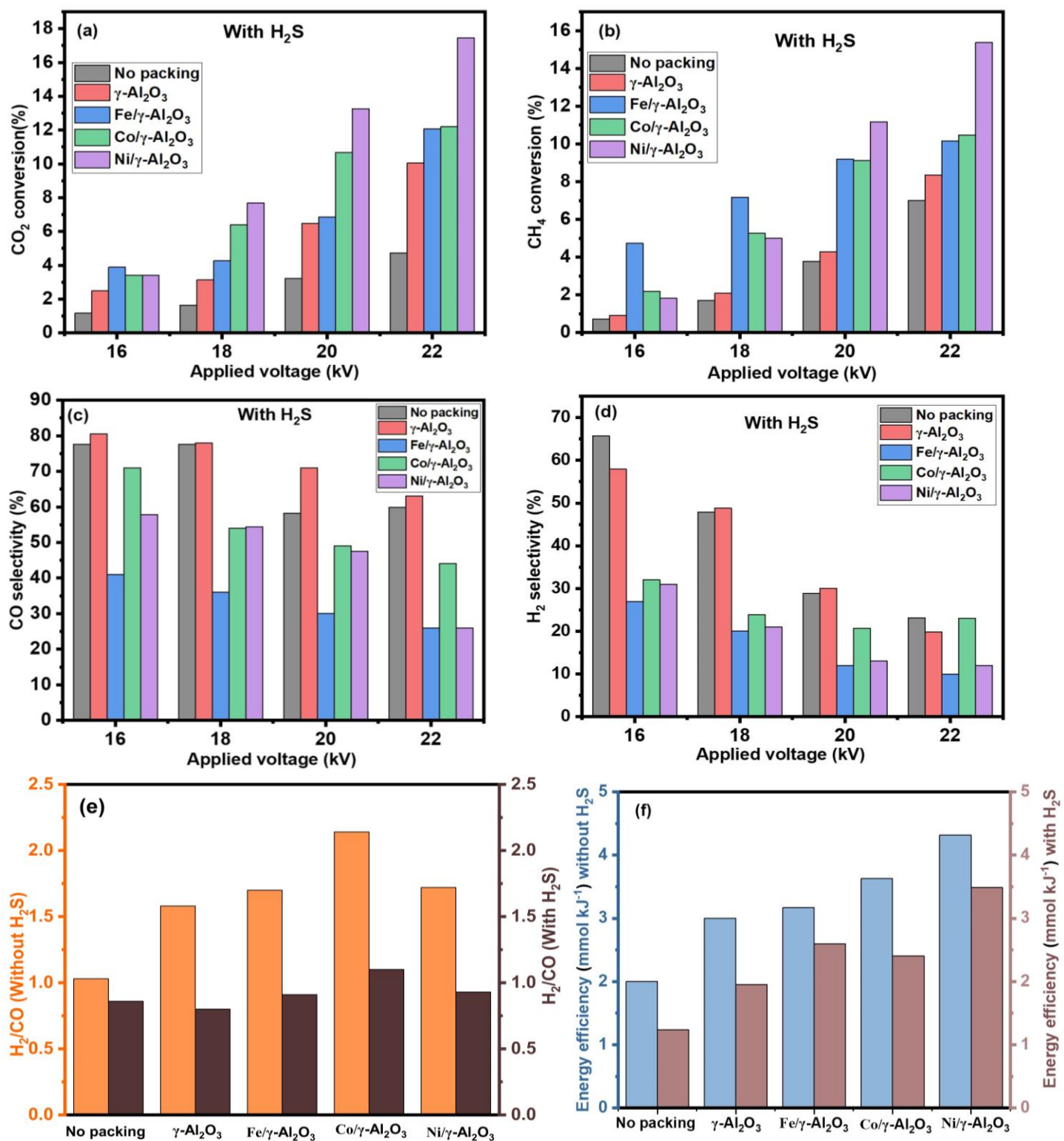


Fig 3. (a) & (b) CO₂ and CH₄ conversion, (c) & (d) CO and H₂ selectivity plotted against applied voltage. (e) & (f) H₂/CO ratio and energy efficiency with no packing and packed materials at an applied voltage of 22 kV.

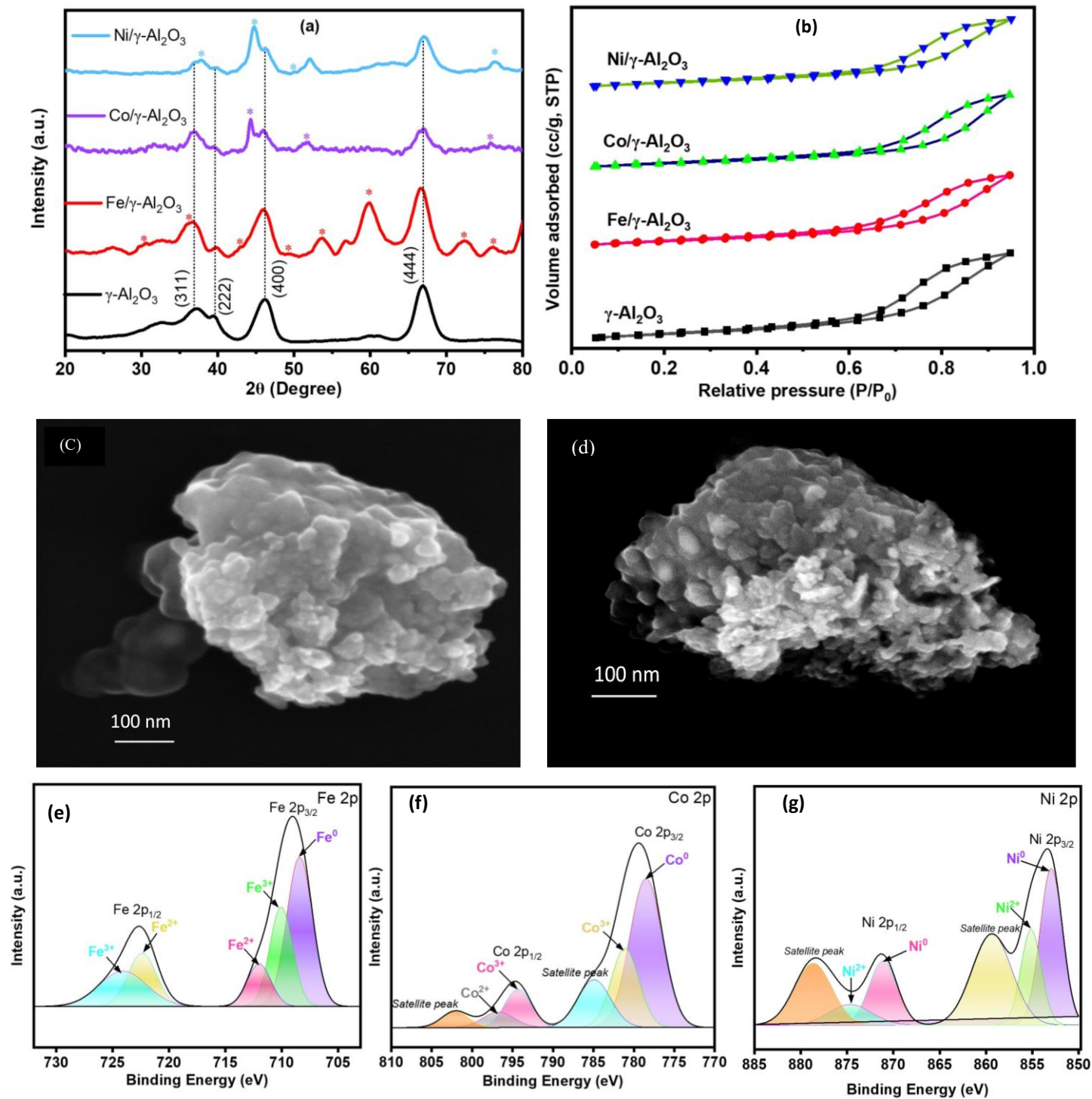


Fig. 4. (a) XRD spectra, (b) BET analysis of the prepared catalysts, (c) & (d) SEM images of Ni/ γ - Al_2O_3 catalyst fresh and H_2S treated respectively. (e-g) XPS spectra of prepared catalyst.

3. MATERIAL AND METHODS

The catalysts were synthesized using an incipient wetness impregnation method. The metal precursor solutions were prepared by dissolving each metal salt Ni(NO_3)₂·6H₂O (Co(NO_3)₂·6H₂O, and Fe(NO_3)₃·9H₂O, in a small quantity of water that was precisely enough to

occupy the void spaces of the γ - Al_2O_3 support. The γ - Al_2O_3 underwent an initial calcination process at a temperature of 400°C for a duration of 5 h to eliminate any impurities, such as adsorbed H₂O. Subsequently, it was introduced into the precursor solution and subjected to stirring until complete homogeneity was

achieved. The resultant mixture was maintained at ambient temperature for a duration of 3 h, followed by subsequent drying at a temperature of 80°C over the night. Subsequently, calcination was done at a temperature of 500°C for a duration of 4 h. Finally, all the prepared catalysts were reduced in a tubular furnace at 700°C with H₂ gas.

3.1 Catalyst characterization

The X-ray diffraction (XRD) patterns of the catalysts were acquired using Rigaku Pro XRD instrument equipped with Cu-K_α radiation source. The measurements were conducted within 2θ range of 20°–80°. The physisorption properties of the catalysts were assessed by conducting N₂ adsorption/desorption measurements on a NOVA2200e automated gas sorption analyzer (Quantachrome, USA) at a constant temperature of 77 K using liquid nitrogen. Before analysis, all samples were pre-treated, which involved degassing at 300°C for a duration of 3 h under a vacuum. Catalyst morphologies were characterized by using a scanning electron microscopy. X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) was employed to identify the catalyst's surface chemical composition and oxidation state. The analysis was conducted using an AXIS Supra-Kratos analytical spectrophotometer equipped with a monochromatic X-ray source, specifically Al-K_α, with an energy of 1486.6 eV.

4. RESULTS

4.1 XRD and XPS analysis

X-ray diffraction analysis was conducted on the catalysts in their pristine state prior to initiating the reaction. Prominent peaks corresponding to γ-Al₂O₃ are observed in all XRD patterns, as depicted in **Fig. 4a**. The presence of these peaks is shown at 2θ = 36.9°, 39.7°, 46.2°, 66.98°, corresponding to the cubic structure of γ-Al₂O₃ crystalline (PDF# 10-0425). All these peaks can also be observed in the XRD patterns of the fresh M/γ-Al₂O₃ (M=Fe,Co,Ni) catalysts. Fe/γ-Al₂O₃ shows Fe₂O₃ phase at 2θ = 35.7°, 49.8°, and 54.4° in the spectra, and other peaks were also observed for metallic form of Fe.[15] XRD pattern of the Co/γ-Al₂O₃ catalyst shows the formation of Cobalt oxide originating from the decomposition of Co(NO₃)₂ into CoO and subsequent oxidation of the CoO species to Co₂O₃ which upon further reaction with CoO converted to Co₃O₄. The peaks of the two Co containing phases, Co₃O₄ and CoAl₂O₄ were difficult to distinguish due to a very slight difference in their lattice constants.

These phases are also present in the prepared catalyst.[16] XRD pattern of the Ni/γ-Al₂O₃ shows the reduced metallic Ni from its oxide form at 2θ = 44.4°, 51.6°, and 76.08°. NiO is also present, but with less intensity.[17]

XPS result of the prepared catalysts is presented in **Fig. 4 (e-g)**. The binding energies of the Fe 2p, Co 2p and Ni 2p are reported. The binding energies for the Fe 2p_{3/2} are around 708.4 eV, 710.8 eV and Fe 2p_{1/2}, are around 722.5 eV and 724.4 eV in the Fe 2p spectra. Fig. 4e confirms the Fe⁰, Fe³⁺ and Fe²⁺ for the Fe/γ-Al₂O₃ catalyst.[18,19] In the acquired Ni2p spectra (Fig. 4g), the peaks Ni2p_{3/2} and Ni2p_{1/2} can be observed. The most significant Ni2p_{3/2} and Ni2p_{1/2} peaks are found at binding energies of 852.9 eV and 871.1 eV for NiO and 855.1 eV and 874.6 eV for Ni²⁺ respectively.[20] The binding energies of Co 2p_{3/2} and its satellite peak were discovered at 779.0, 782.7 and 786.1 eV respectively, whereas those of Co2p_{1/2} and its satellite peak were discovered at 794.4, 796.16, and 802.3 eV respectively.[21] These demonstrate the coexistence of CoO, Co²⁺ and Co³⁺ in the sample which is shown in Fig. 4f.

4.2 BET analysis

The observed variations in surface area among the catalysts (**Table 1**) were minimal and did not exhibit a consistent correlation with the achieved conversions in the biogas reforming reaction. **Fig. 4b** shows the BET isotherms. Consequently, the determination of reaction performance was not primarily influenced by the surface area and, consequently, the number of active sites present on the catalyst surface. All the catalysts, in fact, had a lower surface area than the alumina support because of the blockage of pores of γ-Al₂O₃ by the metal atoms. γ-Al₂O₃ is well-known for its high porosity and substantial surface area. Consequently, when the alumina bead is coated with a catalyst material of lower porosity, the surface area of the combined catalyst + alumina is decreased when compared with alumina alone. All catalysts have a Type-V isotherm and an H3-type hysteresis loop at relative pressures between 0.5 and 0.95, which suggests the existence of mesopores.

Table 1. BET analysis was used to evaluate the surface area, pore volume, and pore size of γ -Al₂O₃ and the other metal catalysts used in the plasma-catalytic biogas reforming reaction.

Catalyst	S _{BET} (m ² /g)	Total Pore volume (cm ³ /g)	Average Pore size (nm)
γ -Al ₂ O ₃	263	0.758	5.7
Fe/ γ -Al ₂ O ₃	242	0.646	5.35
Co/ γ -Al ₂ O ₃	213	0.614	5.76
Ni/ γ -Al ₂ O ₃	208	0.573	5.3

4.3 Effect of catalysts on discharge characteristics

Fig. 5 shows the Q-V Lissajous figure employed in the estimation of power dissipation during plasma discharge. When transition metal catalysts are introduced into the discharge zone of the DBD reactor, area of the Lissajous figure increased comparison to a system without the catalyst. **Fig. 2e** shows that DBD packed with catalyst showed the highest power compared to no packed DBD, due to the greater occurrence of micro discharges and filamentary discharges within the plasma.[22,23] The commonly observed phenomenon is that the quantity of charge transfer during each half cycle reduces as the applied voltage decreases. This reduction in charge transfer can potentially decrease the generation of highly energetic electrons and active plasma species. The discharge characteristics exhibit noticeable changes in the plasma reactor when catalyst packing is present and absent, as depicted in **Table 2**. Detailed calculation of plasma parameters procedure was provided in our recent article.[24] Despite using different catalytic materials, there was no notable change in the discharge parameters. The dielectric capacitance of the empty DBD is measured to be 0.81 μ F, while the DBD plasma with Ni/ γ -Al₂O₃ exhibits a capacitance of 1.22 μ F. Also, changes were observed with cell capacitance, charge transfer per half cycle, peak to peak charge transfer as well. Therefore, it can be deduced that the choice of packing material has an impact on the performance of the reaction.

Table 2. Influence of catalyst packing on the plasma discharge.

Plasma mode	Power (W)	Qpk-pk (μ C)	dQ (μ C)	C _d (μ F)	C _{cell} (μ F)
P only	1.35	10.9	6.3	0.81	0.19
P+ γ -Al ₂ O ₃	1.47	11.8	7.9	0.86	0.22
P+Fe/ γ -Al ₂ O ₃	1.66	12	8.7	0.85	0.23
P+Co/ γ -Al ₂ O ₃	1.86	12.3	8.4	0.94	0.27
P+Ni/ γ -Al ₂ O ₃	2.1	12.5	8.8	1.22	0.23

*P=Plasma

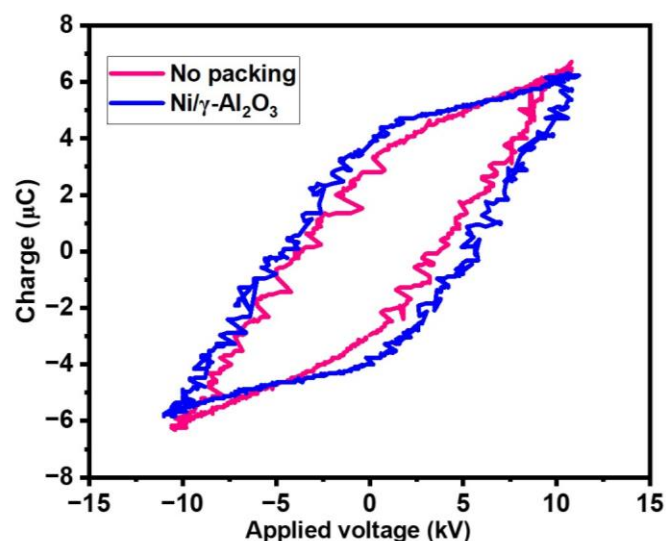


Fig. 5. Q-V Lissajous figures of the plasma alone and Ni/ γ -Al₂O₃ packing with plasma.

4.4 Biogas conversion

The conversions of CO₂ and CH₄ were investigated in relation to the applied voltage, employing various transition metal catalysts which are shown in **Fig. 2 (a & b)**. In all instances, the conversions of gas exhibited an upward trend in correspondence with the escalation of applied voltage. In this study, the augmentation in applied voltage is attained through discharge power while maintaining a constant frequency. This procedure leads to the generation of additional reaction channels and intensifies the charge transfer in plasma chemical reactions. Consequently, the augmentation in discharge

power induces a corresponding escalation in the magnitude of micro discharges within the discharge gap, thereby enhancing the CO₂ and CH₄ conversion. In comparison to the plasma-only system, the integration of DBD with transition metal catalysts resulted in a marginal improvement in the conversion of biogas. The integration of Ni/ γ -Al₂O₃ catalyst in discharge zone of the DBD reactor has been found to have the maximum CO₂ and CH₄ conversion compared to other catalysts.

4.5 Formation of main gas products

The major products CO and H₂ are produced during the biogas reforming reaction. **Fig. 2 (c & d)** depicts the selectivity of CO and H₂ with and without catalysts at various applied voltages. The distribution of products is primarily influenced by the catalyst packed DBD.

In all cases, it was observed that an increase in voltage resulted in a decrease in the selectivity of both carbon monoxide (CO) and hydrogen (H₂). This behavior may be attributed to Boudouard reaction in the discharge zone. The process of coke formation is observed to occur concurrently with the ongoing reaction. **Fig. 2f** shows the decrease in carbon balance with increased applied voltage. Within the discharge zone, solid carbon is deposited onto the inner surfaces of the quartz material, cylindrical quartz tube and the interface between the inner electrode and the tube. The limited specificity of H₂ gas can be attributed to the relatively less probable reverse water gas shift reaction. Furthermore, it is possible for the synthesis of higher hydrocarbons. However, the presence of these higher hydrocarbons was not detected in our gas chromatography due to analytical limitations. Xin Tu et al., reported that higher hydrocarbons also formed during the biogas reaction with DBD reactor.[25]

4.6 Influence of H₂S on Biogas reforming

After doing a biogas reforming experiment without H₂S, similar experiments were carried out with H₂S to examine its effect on the reaction when packed with different catalyst materials in the DBD reactor while conducting a biogas reforming experiment. In the context of biogas reforming using plasma catalysis, the rate of conversion of both CH₄ and CO₂ experienced a significant decrease in all the conditions upon the introduction of H₂S into the reaction mixture. SEM images confirm that the presence of localized aggregation of sulfur deposits on the catalysts surface

decreases the catalytic activity. **Fig. 3 (a-d)** shows the conversion of gas and product gas selectivity in the presence of H₂S in the reaction mixture. DBD packed with Ni/ γ -Al₂O₃ catalyst conversion rates dropped for CH₄ from 24% to 15%, and for CO₂ from 21% to 17%, in the absence and presence of H₂S, respectively. As shown in **Fig. 3(e)**, the H₂/CO ratio of the product gas in the packed DBD consistently exceeded that of the unpacked DBD, irrespective of the absence or presence of H₂S. A maximum syngas ratio of 2.14 was attained when employing Co/ γ -Al₂O₃ used in a DBD reactor in the absence of H₂S. However, upon introducing H₂S into the gas mixture, the syngas ratio dropped from 2.14 to 1.1 with Co/ γ -Al₂O₃ packed DBD, primarily due to the adverse impact of the poison effect.[9,26]

Fig. 3f demonstrates the calculation of energy efficiency at the highest discharge power in both an empty plasma reactor and a DBD packed with catalysts. The energy efficiency achieved using Ni/ γ -Al₂O₃ is around 4.2 mmol/kJ. Across all scenarios, the packed DBD consistently exhibited maximum energy efficiency when compared to the unpacked DBD. Although there was only a slight difference in energy efficiency when using various catalyst materials, the introduction of H₂S into the reaction mixture caused a decrease in energy efficiency in all instances.

5. DISCUSSION

In the context of plasma catalysis, it is frequently noted that catalyst surfaces tend to display a higher degree of surface discharges, whereas streamer filaments are primarily limited to the empty spaces within the DBD reactor. This observation implies that surface reactions have the potential to exceed plasma gas-phase reactions in terms of their relevance and influence. To enhance comprehension of coke and sulfur deposition, SEM images were captured for both fresh catalysts and spent (with H₂S) catalyst of Ni/ γ -Al₂O₃. These images were utilized to discern and analyze any discernible disparities on the catalytic surface. (**Fig. 4 c&d**). In **Fig.4d**, SEM image was obtained of a catalyst that had been subjected to a gas stream containing 0.054% H₂S. The image revealed the presence of localized aggregation of sulfur deposits on the catalyst's surface.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Our investigation involved examining the plasma catalytic conversion of biogas into syngas. The impact of H₂S on the conversions of CH₄ and CO₂ was investigated.

It was observed that the influence of 0.054 % H₂S resulted in a significant decrease in the conversions of CH₄ and CO₂ drastically decreased from 24% and 21% to 15% and 17%, respectively. Based on the examination of the catalyst's characteristics, it was found that the coke deposition and sulfur deposition that happened during the reaction on the catalyst's surface, which showed the efficiency of the reaction there was a significant level of dominance in the absence of H₂S, but this dominance decreased when H₂S was introduced. In contrast, it was observed that the reaction performance drastically changes during sulfur deposition under given conditions. Based on the results of this study, it can be inferred that neglecting the existence of H₂S in the process of biogas reforming is an incorrect assumption.

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DECLARATION OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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