Modelling of rechargeable NiMH batteries

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Abstract

A new mathematical model has been developed for rechargeable NiMH batteries, which is based on the occurring physical–chemical processes inside. This model enables one to simultaneously simulate the battery voltage, internal gas pressures (both \( P_{O_2} \) and \( P_{H_2} \)) and temperature during battery operation. The model takes into account the thermodynamics, kinetics and diffusion processes occurring at/in both electrodes and in the electrolyte.

Keywords: Hydrogen storage materials; Electrode materials; Electrochemical reactions

1. Introduction

Nickel–metal hydride (NiMH) batteries are nowadays successfully applied in the field of consumer electronics and electrical vehicles and have several advantages over NiCd and Li-ion batteries. NiMH batteries have a high-energy storage density and can be operated at high current densities and low temperatures. Their chemical elements are nontoxic. The theoretical open-circuit potential of the NiMH battery is approximately 1.3 V, very similar to that of the NiCd battery [1,2]. This makes these two different battery systems very compatible.

Models, which can accurately predict the behaviour of batteries during operation are not only important for battery manufacturers to study the impact of new electrode materials on the battery characteristics but also for developers of advanced battery management systems allowing them, for example, to further optimise battery charging and state-of-charge algorithms [3–5].

Mathematical models have been developed for both Ni and MH electrodes [6,7], and for NiMH [8,9]. Unfortunately, these battery models do not predict the interactive behaviour of the battery voltage, temperature and internal pressure during operation. In the present work we introduce a new complete mathematical model for the NiMH batteries, considering all these aspects. We will restrict ourselves here to a brief description of the MH electrode since the Ni electrode has been carefully described before [3,4].

2. Theoretical model

2.1. General chemical description

The NiMH battery consists of two electrodes immersed in an alkaline electrolyte, which provides ionic conductivity between these electrodes. The electrodes are electrically insulated from each other by a separator. During charging divalent Ni is oxidized to the trivalent Ni state [1–6]

\[
xNi(OH)_2 + xOH^- \leftrightarrow xNiOOH + xH_2O + xe^- \quad (1)
\]

and water is reduced to hydrogen atoms at the MH electrode, which can subsequently be absorbed in the hydride-forming intermetallic compound [1], according to

\[
M + xH_2O + xe^- \leftrightarrow MH_x + xOH^- \quad (2)
\]

Hydroxyl ions and water molecules are transported in the electrolyte from one electrode to the other. Hence no electrolyte consumption takes place during charging and discharging. The reverse reactions take place during discharging.

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During overcharging hydroxyl ions are oxidized and oxygen evolution starts at the Ni electrode [1–5]
\[ 4\text{OH}^- \leftrightarrow \text{O}_2 + 2\text{H}_2\text{O} + 4\text{e}^- \quad (3) \]
As a result, the partial oxygen pressure inside the battery will rise. Fortunately, oxygen can be transported to the MH electrode interface where it can be reduced to hydroxyl ions again. In the steady state, the amount of oxygen evolved at the Ni electrode is equal to the amount of oxygen recombined at the MH electrode, keeping the internal gas pressure constant.

### 2.2. MH electrode

The storage reaction at the MH electrode is more complex and consists in the simplest case of four reaction steps in alkaline solution [1,2]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{M} + \text{H}_2\text{O} + \text{e}^- & \rightarrow \text{M} \text{H}_{\text{abs}} \quad \text{k}_1 \\
\text{M} \text{H}_{\text{abs}} & \rightarrow \text{M} \text{H}_{\text{ad}} \quad \text{k}_2 \\
\frac{1}{2}\text{H}_2\text{O} & \rightarrow \frac{1}{2}\text{H}_2\text{O} \quad \text{k}_3 \\
\frac{1}{2}\text{H}_2\text{O} & \rightarrow \frac{1}{2}\text{H}_2\text{O} \quad \text{k}_4
\end{align*}
\]

(4)

The charge transfer reaction occurs at the electrode–electrolyte interface. As a result atomic hydrogen is chemically adsorbed at the surface. The adsorbed hydrogen atoms can subsequently be converted into the absorbed state by diffusing inside the electrode. Simultaneously recombination of two chemically adsorbed hydrogen atoms may take place at the electrode surface, leading to dissolved hydrogen in the electrolyte (H_{2(1)}). Finally, H_{2(1)} is in equilibrium with that in the gas phase (H_{2(g)}). Using this description of chemical reactions of the MH electrode, we define the corresponding chemical fluxes, and obtain a complete set of kinetic equations and flux balances.

A lattice gas model has been used to describe the thermodynamics of intercalated hydrogen. For simplicity, a mean field model has been adopted, which assumes a long-range interaction of intercalated hydrogen atoms [10]. The equilibrium potential of the MH electrode (\(E_{\text{eq}}^{\text{MH}}\)) is related to the Gibbs free energy (\(\Delta G_{\text{MH}}\)) and equilibrium hydrogen pressure (\(P_{\text{H}_2}\)) and chemical potential [2,11,12], according to

\[
\Delta G_{\text{MH}} = \sum \eta_i \mu_i = RT \ln \left( \frac{P_{\text{H}_2}^{\text{eq}}}{P_{\text{ref}}} \right) = -nFE_{\text{MH}}^{\text{eq}}
\]

(5)

where \(R\) is the gas constant, \(T\) is the temperature, \(P_{\text{ref}}\) is the reference pressure of 1 bar, \(n\) is the number of electrons involved in Eq. (2) and \(F\) is the Faraday constant.

At low hydrogen concentrations a solid solution is formed in the MH electrode, which is generally denoted by the \(\alpha\) phase. After the hydrogen activity in the MH electrode reaches a certain critical value (\(x_c\)), the formation of a new \(\beta\) phase starts and a two-phase coexistence region is formed. After reaching the critical value \(x_p\), phase transformation is completed and a solid solution region is again formed now denoted by the \(\beta\) phase. The following set of equations for the equilibrium potential of the MH electrode has been derived

\[
E_{\text{MH}}^i = \begin{cases} 
E_{1}^i + (T - T_{\text{ref}}) \frac{\Delta S_{\text{298}}^0}{nF} + \frac{RT}{nF} \left( \ln \left( \frac{1 - x}{x} \right) - U_{x} \right), & x < x_a \\
E_{2}^i + (T - T_{\text{ref}}) \frac{\Delta S_{\text{298}}^0}{nF} + \frac{RT}{nF} \left( \ln \left( \frac{1 - x}{x} \right) - U_{x} \right), & x > x_p 
\end{cases}
\]

(6)

where \(E_{1}^i\) is the standard electrode potential of phase \(i\), \(T_{\text{ref}}\) is the reference temperature at 298 K, \(\Delta S_{\text{298}}^0\) the standard entropy, \(x\) the molar fraction of hydrogen intercalated in the MH electrode, \(k_1\) and \(C\) are coefficients that are depending on the interaction energies and standard electrode potentials of each phase.

The charge transfer kinetics of the electrochemical storage reaction is described by a Butler–Volmer equation. This equation expresses the dependence of the reaction current on the overpotential (\(\eta_{\text{MH}}\)), exchange current (\(I_{\text{MH}}^0\)) and charge transfer coefficient \((\alpha_{\text{MH}})\):

\[
I_{\text{MH}} = I_{\text{MH}}^0 \left\{ \exp \left[ \frac{\alpha_{\text{MH}}nF}{RT} \eta_{\text{MH}} \right] - \exp \left[ - \frac{(1 - \alpha_{\text{MH}})nF}{RT} \eta_{\text{MH}} \right] \right\}
\]

(7)

Diffusion of hydrogen inside the solid is treated in a conventional way by adopting Fick’s laws [3,6,7]. Oxygen evolution takes place during overcharging at the Ni electrode (Eq. (3)). In order to recombine \(\text{O}_2\) it has to be transported to the MH electrode. Considering a mixed kinetics–diffusion process for the oxygen recombination reaction at the MH electrode one obtains the following equation for the reaction current [4,5]

\[
I_{\text{rec}} = I_{\text{rec}}^{\text{kin}} + I_{\text{rec}}^{\text{diff}}
\]

(8)

where \(I_{\text{rec}}^{\text{kin}}\) is the kinetics current given by a Butler–Volmer equation, \(I_{\text{rec}}^{\text{diff}}\) is the diffusion current which depends on the electrode surface area and the average diffusion layer thickness through which \(\text{O}_2\) must be transported.

Since the oxygen reduction reaction takes place at very high overpotentials it is allowed to conclude that diffusion of oxygen is the limiting stage of the hydrogen recombination process [4,5].

### 2.3. Battery pressure development

The partial oxygen gas pressure is related to the amount of oxygen produced at the Ni electrode minus the amount of oxygen consumed at the MH electrode. The partial
hydrogen pressure consists of the thermodynamically
determined equilibrium pressure that can be obtained from
Eq. (5) and a kinetically controlled part ($P_{\text{H}_2}^{\text{kin}}$), which can
be obtained from considering the various fluxes in the
scheme of Eq. (4). The total partial hydrogen pressure is
then composed of $P_{\text{H}_2}^{\text{tot}} = P_{\text{H}_2}^{\text{eq}} + P_{\text{H}_2}^{\text{kin}}$. Obviously, the total
battery pressure is the sum of partial oxygen and hydrogen
pressures.

2.4. Temperature development

The temperature of the battery depends on the heat flux
generated by the battery ($J_{\text{in}}$) and heat dissipation to the
environment ($J_{\text{out}}$):

$$\frac{dT}{dt} = \frac{J_{\text{in}} - J_{\text{out}}}{C_{\text{bat}}}$$

(9)

where $C_{\text{bat}}$ is the heat capacitance of the battery [4,5].

The Ni electrode has been modelled in an analogous
way, i.e. by considering the electrochemical storage re-
action, the side reactions and transport properties [3–5].
Evidently, the total battery voltage is given by $E_{\text{Ni}}$ and
$E_{\text{MH}}$.

3. Results and discussion

Using the battery model briefly presented in this paper
one can simultaneously simulate the battery voltage, gas
pressure and temperature. The simulation of charging and
overcharging process is shown in Fig. 1. The voltage
increased during charging and decreased during overcharg-
ing. Battery pressure and temperature are sharply increased
as soon as the oxygen formation starts. During prolonged
overcharging the voltage decreases again due to the
temperature rise resulting from the extensive heat gene-
ration of the oxygen recombination reaction. These effects
have also been observed experimentally [13].

Fig. 2 shows the equilibrium potential of the MH electrode ($E_{\text{MH}}^{\text{eq}}$) as a function of
state-of-charge at 0 and 24 °C.

As expected, the recombination reaction current increases
sharply during overcharging. The proposed model allows
simulations of various battery characteristics such as
voltage, pressure and temperature. Although a good agree-

Fig. 1. Simulation results of battery voltage, internal gas pressure and
temperature during battery operation.

Fig. 3. Simulated hydrogen related reaction current ($I_{\text{H}_{2}}$) and oxygen
recombination current ($I_{\text{rec}}$) as a function of charging time ($t$).
ment is found with the experiments further optimisation of the input model parameters is required.

4. Conclusions

In the present work we introduce a new mathematical model for the NiMH rechargeable batteries, which describes various physical–chemical processes occurring in the battery. This enables one to simultaneously simulate the battery voltage, internal gas pressures (both $P_{\text{O}_2}$ and $P_{\text{H}_2}$) and temperature during battery operation. The model takes into account the relevant thermodynamics, kinetics and diffusion processes occurring at/in both electrodes and in the electrolyte. Suitable computer software has been developed and reveals a good agreement between simulation and experiments.

References


