Field trial of hollow fiber modules of hybrid facilitated transport membranes for flue gas CO₂ capture in cement industry

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A B S T R A C T

Alarming increase in global CO₂ emissions warrants acceleration of CO₂ capture technologies. In this work, testing of pre-pilot scale membrane modules containing hybrid facilitated transport membranes in hollow fiber configuration is reported. The tests were carried out using real flue gas from a slipstream in the Colacem cement plant located in Gubbio, Italy. With the fabricated modules, CO₂ flux of up to 750 NL m⁻² h⁻¹ with a CO₂ permeate purity ranging from 50 to 55 vol% was recorded. All pre-pilot membrane modules showed increased CO₂ permeance in industrial testing (1.5 to 1.9x higher) compared to laboratory evaluation owing to the reliable water profile and high temperature of the flue gas from the chimney. Influence of operating parameters (e.g., pressures in the feed and permeate) were studied. Long-term testing showed no obvious reduction in permeation performance. Furthermore, the membranes with mobile carriers when exposed to the feed gas containing SO₂ and NOₓ exhibited good resistance to performance deterioration despite high concentrations of acidic impurities. Simulation studies based on validated experimental performance under industrial conditions reveal the high potential of the fabricated membranes as an efficient separation unit capable of achieving industrial capture rate and CO₂ purity requirements using a relatively low membrane area.

1. Introduction

Global greenhouse gas emissions have been increasing since the industrial revolution, leading to the average atmospheric CO₂ concentration rising at an alarming rate of 3 ppm(v)/year, reaching 414 ppm(v) in 2020 [1]. Overt effects of climate change in the 21st century, along with the international consensus on its direct dependence on CO₂ emissions, expedite the need for urgent implementation of emission reduction technologies. Carbon capture and storage (CCS) has been proven to be a strategic approach to significantly cut-down CO₂ emissions, especially from large-point sources like power generation, cement industries and iron and steel production facilities [2].

Although studied over decades, CCS implementation is mainly limited by the availability of versatile, environmentally benign and economically favorable technology to capture CO₂ from flue gas [3]. Among the state-of-the-art technologies for CO₂ capture, membrane technology is particularly advantageous due to its simplicity, high flexibility and modularity, low energy requirement and carbon footprint [4]. Over the past years, numerous membrane materials have been developed with improved separation properties to increase the efficiency of the flue gas treatment process [5]. Typical membrane material development involves various strategies to engineer materials that have simultaneous high CO₂ permeability and CO₂/N₂ selectivity [6]. Such membranes are usually fabricated in lab-scale as thick self-standing films. Interesting materials are then fabricated as thin-film composites (TFC) on porous supports and evaluated for separation properties using gas mixtures as feed gas [7]. In most cases, the membrane development process terminates at this juncture most likely due to the knowledge gap between lab-based research and industrial requirements or lack of a collaborative possibility to establish a constant feedback loop between technology developers and potential end-users [8]. These limitations result in only a small number of membrane materials being eventually scaled-up and tested in conditions pertinent to the targeted end-users [9]. The upscaled modules are expected to treat incoming flue gas and result in certain targets of CO₂ capture rate and CO₂ purity, depending
Summary of pre-pilot module properties.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Module ID</th>
<th>Polymer matrix</th>
<th>Nanofiller</th>
<th>Mobile carrier</th>
<th>No. of fibers</th>
<th>Length of fibers, cm</th>
<th>Membrane area, cm²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HFTM</td>
<td>SHPAA/PVA</td>
<td>0.2 wt% pGO</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HFTM with 10% [Emim][OAc]</td>
<td>SHPAA/PVA</td>
<td>0.2 wt% pGO, 10% [Emim] [OAc]</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>150</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HFTM with 20% ProK</td>
<td>SHPAA/PVA</td>
<td>0.2 wt% pGO, 20% ProK</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>175</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Combustion parameters of the kiln and flue gas properties.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cement kiln</th>
<th>Fuel feeding (t h⁻¹)</th>
<th>Clinker production (t h⁻¹)</th>
<th>Raw material feeding (t h⁻¹)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-192</td>
<td>-17</td>
<td>-192</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Stack emission components

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CO₂ (%v/v)</th>
<th>O₂ (%v/v)</th>
<th>N₂ (%v/v)</th>
<th>CO (ppm(v))</th>
<th>NOₓ (ppm(v))</th>
<th>SO₂ (ppm(v))</th>
<th>NH₃ (ppm(v))</th>
<th>HCl (ppm(v))</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CO₂</td>
<td>10.5-12.0</td>
<td>14.0-15.5</td>
<td>73-76</td>
<td>50-100</td>
<td>100-120</td>
<td>0-3</td>
<td>20-40</td>
<td>0.5-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O₂</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>NOₓ</td>
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<td>SO₂</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

150 cm² to 200 cm² were assembled. The material configuration in the modules and the design aspects are summarised in Table 1.

2.3. In-field tests

The in-field pre-pilot testing was carried out at Colacem cement plant located in Gubbio, Italy. The production facility uses marl, limestone and small amounts of alternatives as raw materials with petroleum coke as fuel. The plant can operate at an effective clinker production capacity of 3000 tonnes day⁻¹ (34.7 kg s⁻¹). The conditions of clinker production during the in-field testing and the corresponding emitted flue gas properties are furnished in Table 2.

Flue gas without major pre-treatment was used in this in-field testing campaign. The process flow diagram of the pre-pilot membrane testing system is shown in Fig. 2. The flue gas feed to the membrane module was retrieved from the emission stack from a sampling point located at a height of 75 m. A ceramic dust filter (SP180-H - M&C Tech Group, 2 µm porosity) was employed to remove particulate matter before retrieval. The flow rate of wet flue gas was at around 10-12 L min⁻¹ (0.17–0.2 L s⁻¹). The membrane module was placed in a heated cabinet. The feed stream into the heated cabinet was at a temperature of 60-65 °C, while the heating cabinet was maintained at a constant temperature of 60 °C. A needle valve was used on the retentate side to control the feed pressure serving as a manual back pressure regulator. The permeate side of the membrane module was either connected to a vacuum pump or to the sweep gas depending on the tests. The compositions of permeate and retentate was measured using gas analysers (Horiba PG 350 SRM (Horiba, Japan) and Testo Model 350XL-350S (Testo, USA). The flows were measured using a flow meter, TSI 4143 (USA), and verified using a bubble flow meter. All gas lines were encased with electric heating covers with water knockouts at multiple points to prevent condensation of water and obtain desirable operating temperature.

The flue gas from the stack contained 9–11 vol% water at 115 °C. This water content corresponds to a relative humidity of 5.40 to 6.59 % RH at 1 bar and 115 °C. For the study on the water content effect on permeation properties, an additional humid stream (makeup stream) was mixed with the flue gas in an evaporator at 115 °C. The makeup stream was prepared by using a carrier gas (simulated flue gas, 12.6% CO₂/14% O₂/73.4% N₂ by volume) and DI water in a gas generator (HovaCAL® digital MF, IAS GmbH, Germany). The total water content was changed to 15 vol% and 20 vol% by using the external evaporator. The synthetic air (IP grade 20.93% O₂ and 79.07% N₂) was used in the study on the effect of feed pressures.

The gas permeation performance of the fabricated pre-pilot membrane modules was evaluated by CO₂ flux and CO₂ purity in the permeate after a single-stage operation. The CO₂ flux across the membrane was calculated by equation (1).

\[ J_{CO_2} = \frac{v_p \times y_{CO_2, P}}{A_{eff}} \]  

where \( J_{CO_2} \) is the flux in cm³(STP) cm⁻² s⁻¹ (1 cm³(STP) cm⁻² s⁻¹ = 10⁻² m³(STP) m⁻² s⁻¹), \( v_p \) is the permeate flow rate in cm³(STP) s⁻¹, \( y_{CO_2, P} \) is the concentration of CO₂ in the permeate side and \( A_{eff} \) is the effective membrane area in cm². The calculated flux was verified with feed and retentate side mass balance wherever possible.

Pressure ratio (\( \phi \)) is defined as the ratio of total feed pressure to total permeate pressure represented by equation (2).

\[ \phi = \frac{P_F}{P_P} \]  

where \( P_F \) and \( P_P \) are the feed and permeate pressures in bar.

2.4. Lab-scale permeation tests

Lab-scale modules of the chosen HFTMs were also evaluated using an inhouse built humid mixed gas permeation rig at two conditions of RH. Synthetic feed gas mixture containing CO₂/N₂ mixture (10/90 v/v) was
used as feed and pure CH$_4$ was used as the sweep gas.

The permeance of component ‘i’ was obtained using the following equation

$$P_i = \frac{V_P(1-y_{H_2O})y_i}{(p_{i,F}-p_{i,R})A}$$  \hspace{1cm} (3)

where the total permeate flow including sweep $V_P$ (ml s$^{-1}$) was measured at the exit at steady state conditions using a bubble flow meter. $y_{H_2O}$ and $y_i$ denote the molar fraction of water and permeating species in the permeate flow, respectively. Partial pressures (in cm Hg$^{-1}$) are $p_{i,F}$, $p_{i,R}$ and $p_{i,P}$ of the species ‘i’ in the feed, retentate and permeate, respectively. $\langle p_{i,F}, p_{i,R}\rangle$ represents the average of feed and retentate pressures.
retentate partial pressure determined by measuring the exit gas compositions using a pre-calibrated gas chromatograph (490 Micro GC, Agilent). Permeance of components are represented in GPU (1 GPU = $10^{-6} \text{cm}^3\text{(STP)} \text{cm}^{-2} \text{s}^{-1} \text{cmHg}^{-1} = 3.35 \times 10^{-10} \text{mol m}^{-2} \text{s}^{-1} \text{Pa}^{-1}$). The apparent separation factor are calculated using concentrations of each component according to the equation

$$\alpha_{ij} = \frac{y_i}{x_i} \frac{y_j}{x_j}$$

(4)

where $y$ and $x$ are the gas contents in the permeate and feed side, respectively.

2.5. Accelerated aging tests

In addition to the field tests carried out at the cement industry, the HFTMs containing mobile carriers were subject to an impurity exposure testing campaign at an independent facility (Pilot-scale Advanced CO$_2$ Capture Technology (PACT)) at the University of Sheffield (USFD). Membranes have been integrated into a slipstream of a gas turbine with and without injection of additional CO$_2$ and other trace gasses to investigate performance over a range of CO$_2$ concentrations (1.3–30 vol %) and gas compositions representative of power generation flue gases and industrial process gases. Turbec T100 series 3 micro Combined Heat and Power (CHP) gas turbine operating on mains natural gas was utilized for the generation of flue gas for testing. Fig. 3 illustrates the overall experimental setup used for the aging tests. Two DX4000 Gasmet FTIR (Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy) gas analysers were utilised for gas monitoring in the experimental setup, both using Calmet v11.2 data analysis software. Gasmet FTIR gas analyser 1 was connected to the monitoring of flue gas at the inlet (feed) and outlet (retentate) of the membrane (sequentially); analyser 2 was permanently connected to slipstream gas outlet for permeate analysis. Sample lines were connected via a sample conditioning unit fitted with 10-µm heated filters set at 180 °C. Analyser 1 was equipped with a 5 L min$^{-1}$ gas sampling membrane pump. For analyser 2, the pump was disabled relaying on the sweep gas to carry the permeate gas to the sample conditioning unit and then the analyser. A 180 °C heated line interconnects the conditioning units and the FTIR analysers. The membranes were tested with nitrogen and 10% vol CO$_2$ feed compositions from cylinders. Initial filter and sampling pump were bypassed. Feed gas flow rates were tested from 5 to 10 L min$^{-1}$ with the pressure of 1.7 bar (absolute). Vacuum was used in the permeate side. NOx and SOx were introduced from calibration gas cylinders in nitrogen at the same point and in the same manner as for CO$_2$.

2.6. Stage-cut analysis

For simulated membrane module performance analysis, the stage-cut and the membrane area requirement were calculated as:

Fig. 5. Effect of (A) total pressure on feed side with sweep gas and (B) vacuum grade on permeate side (feed pressure fixed at 1.7 bar) measured at 60 °C.
concentration in the permeate gas was ranged from 1.5 to 3 vol% and the feed pressure varied from 1.5 to 2.5 bar. Fig. 5A presents the effect of multistage processes [17] – separation membranes has been reported beneficial in gas separation systems using membranes [21].

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Effect of feed pressure and vacuum grade

The membranes considered in this study were previously evaluated for lab-scale permeation performances. The average permeance of the lab-scale modules (effective membrane area: 10–16 cm²) was around 800 GPU, while the CO₂/N₂ separation factor was found to be around 30 for all modules measured using binary CO₂/N₂ feed gas mixture at a feed pressure of 1.7 bar and at 35 °C and fully humid conditions [15]. With the pre-pilot modules, two flow configurations were studied, as shown in Fig. 4. Configuration A uses sweep gas flowing in the bore side while feed gas flows through the shell side of the module at high pressure in a counter-current direction. This configuration reflects lab-scale evaluation under low stage-cut values, assuming complete mixing in the feed and nearly constant driving force across the module. The use of sweep gas in CO₂ separation membranes has been reported beneficial in multistage processes [17–19]. As reported by MTR, USA, in these processes, air, used as sweep gas, is concentrated with CO₂ in the second or third stage, and the CO₂-rich air is recirculated back to the combustion step [15]. The main advantage of using sweep gas in such cascades is the energy advantage for compression that is otherwise required to increase the driving force for permeation.

The use of sweep gas was studied in the HFTM module with the dry synthetic air at a constant flow rate of 3.2 LPM as the sweep gas. The CO₂ concentration in the permeate gas was ranged from 1.5 to 3 vol% and the feed pressure varied from 1.5 to 2.5 bar. Fig. 5A presents the effect of feed pressure on the CO₂ flux. As it can be seen, with increasing feed pressure from 1.5 to 1.7 bar, the CO₂ flux increased due to increasing partial pressure of CO₂ in the feed side. However, increasing the feed pressure further to up to 2.5 bar reflected no obvious changes in the flux but a trend to decrease the flux. Such behaviour is the characteristic of facilitated transport membranes due to the carrier saturation phenomenon [20]. The optimum upstream feed pressure was found to be 1.7 bar.

Given the limitations in increasing upstream feed pressure in order to create higher driving force, vacuum was used on the downstream side instead of the sweep gas to increase the transmembrane pressure difference. Unlike the use of sweep gas, using vacuum helps in concentrating CO₂ on the permeate side to high purities, making it particularly attractive for applications requiring storage or utilization of captured CO₂.

The use of vacuum (Fig. 4, configuration B) positively contributes to enhanced permeation driven by two factors: (i) increased driving force of CO₂ partial pressure between the upstream and downstream side, since the permeating gases are constantly removed by the pump and (ii) increased pressure ratio (ratio of total feed pressure to total permeate pressure, equation (2)). Pressure ratio, along with stage cut (θ) and selectivity, are the three main factors that determine the performance of a gas separation system using membranes [21]. Decreasing vacuum pressure on downstream side increases pressure ratio as seen in Fig. 5B, consequently increasing CO₂ flux across the membrane to up to 13.75 × 10⁻³ cm²(STP) cm⁻² s⁻¹ at the downstream pressure of 0.2 bar which is 1.8x the maximum achievable flux using sweep at the same feed pressure. This high sensitivity of CO₂ flux to the changes in pressure ratio is because the separation happens at the so-called “pressure-ratio-limited region”, where the performance of the membrane is determined solely by the pressure ratio and is independent of membrane selectivity as described by Baker [21]. While the magnitude of pressure ratio can be a theoretical maximum of infinity with the use of a high-grade vacuum, the separation eventually departs from the “pressure-ratio-limited region” and enters a “membrane-selectivity-limited region”, wherein the response to pressure ratio changes are levelled off at an already achieved maximum. In the current scenario, given the lab-scale membrane selectivity is around 30, a further increase in vacuum grade could result in higher fluxes across the membrane. However, it should be noted that the pressure ratio is also an important factor that adds up to the cost of the membrane separation system and hence a very high grade of vacuum would make the process more capital and energy intensive.

3.2. Effect of water activity and temperature on performance of HFTMs

Water plays an important role in facilitated transport membranes containing reactive CO₂ carriers (Fig. 52). The water content in flue gas depends on a variety of factors such as fuel type (mainly moisture content), combustion parameters and exhaust temperature [22]. In this study, the effect of water on transport properties of the pre-pilot modules was studied by using a make-up stream of simulated flue gas carrying additional water using an external evaporator (Fig. 1). The water content in the flue gas from the chimney averaged at ~10 vol% at 115 °C.

\[
\theta = \frac{V_p}{L_p} \times 100 \tag{5}
\]

\[
A_{eq} = \frac{A_{nom}}{T_p} \tag{6}
\]

where \(V_p\) is permeate and \(L_p\) is the feed volumetric flows in Nm³ h⁻¹ and \(A_{nom}\) is the membrane area required for the process in m².

Fig. 6. Change in (A) CO₂ flux and (B) CO₂ purity of HFTMs with varying water activity in the feed measured at 60 °C, 1.7 bar feed pressure, permeate side under vacuum at 0.2 bar.
and 1.05 bar pressure. Two more water contents corresponding to 15 vol% and 20 vol% in the feed were studied using external evaporator operating at the same temperature and pressure conditions. These water contents corresponded to ~51% RH, 78% RH and 99% RH at 1.7 bar and 60 °C.

Beyond an activity of 0.99, condensation problems occurred in the gas lines due to proximity to saturation and fluctuating temperatures at non-insulated regions of the feed gas line. All modules showed an increasing CO₂ flux and purity with increasing water activity from 0.51 to 0.78 as seen in Fig. 6. The effect of mobile carriers was eminent in the scaled-up modules in accordance with the lab scale results. At lower water activity of 0.5, both 10% [Emim][OAc] and 20% ProK containing membranes exhibited a CO₂ flux about 25% and 35% more than that of the one without any mobile carrier. This effect is attributed to the additional CO₂ transport pathway aided by the formation of carbene-adduct in the case of [Emim][OAc] [23] and carbonate/bicarbonate species in the case of ProK in the presence of water [24]. Increasing water activity to 0.78 eventually increased CO₂ flux in all modules by 15–30% than the fluxes at 0.5. A notable increase was found in HFTM without mobile carriers as the transport is mainly steered by facilitated transport mechanism via fixed-site amino groups. Higher water content leads to better utilization of amine groups in the polymer matrix, as evidenced by several studies [4,25,26]. Further increase in water content to 0.99 only resulted in marginal drops in fluxes and purities, indicating local regions of condensation in the module as the conditions are close to saturation. Nevertheless, HFTM with 10% [Emim][OAc] was an exception, where the increased water activity may have caused higher and faster association/disassociation of CO₂ with IL, thus leading to enhanced performance close to the fully humid condition.

In order to compare the performance of the pre-pilot membrane modules with the lab-scale modules, the separation performance achieved at the water activity of 0.78 (~78% RH) was chosen. In bigger modules, the concentration of CO₂ and H₂O in the feed rapidly decreases across the length of the module, and hence the driving force for permeation is no longer constant [8]. This limitation leads to the requirement of a realistic model for driving force to estimate the permeance of individual gases confidently.

To achieve the estimation of gas permeances in the pre-pilot modules, a single-stage membrane separation process mimicking the field test conditions was designed in Aspen HYSYS V9.0 integrated with an in-house built membrane model, ChemBrane. ChemBrane, with counter-current configuration, uses the 4th order Runge-Kutta method for calculating flux across the membrane module length followed by an iteration of permeance values to convergence [27]. The flow diagram described in Fig. 7 was developed in HYSYS, and the permeate and feed compositions obtained from the field tests at the water activity of 0.78 were input for simulation. Subsequently, the permeance values of gas components for each HFTM modules were calculated by manually adjusting and matching the relative ratios with ChemBrane, so that the simulated compositions of streams matched with the gas compositions measured in the exit permeate and retentate streams during the field tests for the same membrane area. The estimated permeance values for gas components in the HFTMs are summarized and compared with their respective lab-scale membrane modules in Table 3.

Table 3: Summary of separation performance of pre-pilot modules.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Module ID</th>
<th>Performance of pre-pilot scale membrane modules*</th>
<th>Performance of lab-scale membrane modules*</th>
<th>Maximum performance of lab-scale membrane modules*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Permeance (GPU) Apparent CO₂/N₂ selectivity</td>
<td>Permeance (GPU) Apparent CO₂/N₂ separation factor</td>
<td>Permeance (GPU) Apparent CO₂/N₂ separation factor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HFTM</td>
<td>CO₂  N₂  O₂</td>
<td>CO₂  N₂</td>
<td>CO₂  N₂</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1133.5</td>
<td>56.6  152.0  20.0</td>
<td>421.8  14.9  28.21</td>
<td>781.8  25.7  30.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HFTM with 10% [Emim][OAc]</td>
<td>1375.8  106.8  156.1  12.9</td>
<td>486.9  17.95  27.12</td>
<td>730.6  22.6  32.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HFTM with 20% ProK</td>
<td>1419.3  87.9  158.5  16.1</td>
<td>501.9  17.64  28.46</td>
<td>808.1  26.0  31.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

HFTM measured at 60 °C/78% RH feed at 1.7 bar/vacuum 0.2 bar. # measured at 35 °C/78% RH feed at 1.7 bar/sweep gas (also at 78% RH) at 1 bar. ± measured at 35 °C/99% RH feed at 1.7 bar/sweep gas at 1 bar.
in membranes with mobile carriers, which confirms the potential of using mobile carriers as CO₂ reactive diffusion enhancers [15]. As expected, the apparent solubilities in these modules are reduced due to the transition towards a more diffusion-dominated mechanism as temperature increases. Evidently, membranes with [Emim][OAc] had the lowest apparent selectivity, which is in line with expectations due to the lower viscosity and reduced solubility of the IL in the membranes, as IL acts as an apparent selectivity, which is in line with expectations due to the lower viscosity and reduced solubility of the IL in the membranes, as IL acts as a physical solvent at higher temperatures [28]. On the other hand, membranes with ProK suffered a smaller drop in selectivity due to the presence of O₂ in the feed stream [31,32]. The CO₂ purity remained constant at ~51 and increasing up to ~56 at the end of the test campaign. Clearly, the feed conditions affected the permeation properties differently. Since the facilitated transport membranes are more sensitive to the feed water content as discussed earlier, the highest water content in the feed on day 15 corresponded to the highest CO₂ purity in the module and recovery of the dropping CO₂ flux that was recorded until day 12. This point also corresponds to the lowest O₂ content in the feed gas stream. Although O₂ is considered as a contaminant in the flue gas for CO₂ separation, O₂ permeabilities are generally lower than CO₂ and higher than N₂ for all polymeric membranes [36]. While oxidative degradation is an important phenomenon in amine-based absorption systems [37], facilitated transport membranes have been reported to have shown no significant degradation with the presence of O₂ in the feed stream [31,32]. On the other hand, it should be noted that the feed flue gas was untreated except for upfront removal of particulate matter and the presence of SOₓ and NOₓ in trace levels did not significantly affect the membrane performance.

3.3. Long-term stability testing of HFTM

Long-term continuous operation of membranes is necessary for evaluation of membrane performance in the pilot scale for successful separation benchmarking [34,35]. Hereof, one case (the HFTM without mobile carriers) was chosen to study the performance durability for an extended period, while the HFTMs with mobile carriers were subjected to impurity testing in an independent facility. Untreated flue gas without the addition of water through external evaporator was used for this purpose. The feed pressure was maintained at 1.7 bar throughout the study. Both CO₂ flux and purity on the permeate side were recorded during the test, which lasted for about two weeks, as seen in Fig. 8. The corresponding changes in flue gas compositions were also monitored to correlate instantaneous responses to the permeation properties. It can be seen that the CO₂ flux of the module dropped slightly from 13.01 × 10⁻³ cm³(STP) cm⁻² s⁻¹ and flattened out at ~10.5 × 10⁻³ cm³(STP) cm⁻² s⁻¹ after 10 days of permeation. On the other hand, the CO₂ purity remained constant at ~51 and increasing up to ~56 at the end of the test campaign. Clearly, the feed conditions affected the permeation properties differently. Since the facilitated transport membranes are more sensitive to the feed water content as discussed earlier, the highest water content in the feed on day 15 corresponded to the highest CO₂ purity in the module and recovery of the dropping CO₂ flux that was recorded until day 12. This point also corresponds to the lowest O₂ content in the feed gas stream. Although O₂ is considered as a contaminant in the flue gas for CO₂ separation, O₂ permeabilities are generally lower than CO₂ and higher than N₂ for all polymeric membranes [36]. While oxidative degradation is an important phenomenon in amine-based absorption systems [37], facilitated transport membranes have been reported to have shown no significant degradation with the presence of O₂ in the feed stream [31,32]. On the other hand, it should be noted that the feed flue gas was untreated except for upfront removal of particulate matter and the presence of SOₓ and NOₓ in trace levels did not significantly affect the membrane performance.

3.4. Effect of impurities on HFTMs with mobile carriers

Typical flue gas contains minor levels of impurities such as SOₓ, NOₓ, H₂S, NH₃, hydrocarbons and some heavy metals [36]. The SOₓ and NOₓ concentrations vary between 500 and 2000 ppmv and between 100 and 500 ppmv, respectively, depending on fuel and combustion technology used [38]. The presence of SOₓ and NOₓ can cause irreversible changes in membranes, thereby causing a potential threat for the durability of membrane performance [39,40]. Mixtures of SOₓ/NOₓ and water generates sulfuric/nitric acid, which could eventually degrade the polymer chains. Conventional polymeric membrane systems typically employ flue gas desulphurisation unit and NOₓ control using catalytic reduction technology prior to the membrane separation unit.

For the study of the effect of acidic contaminants in the flue gas on the membrane performance, an accelerated aging test was carried out by exposing the membranes to a gas mixture of SOₓ and NOₓ in trace levels and under different temperature conditions. The gas mixture was prepared by mixing standard gases in the appropriate proportions. The temperature range was set between 60 and 115 °C, which is the operating temperature for the pilot test in this work. Compared to the lab test (at 35 °C), the faster sorption and desorption of CO₂ with amines at higher temperature can also contribute to the enhanced permeation [20,33]. Moreover, the use of pre-pilot modules of higher packing density when compared to lab scale modules results in a more reliable water profile across the length of the module, ensuring more accessible water for membrane for CO₂ facilitated transport. Besides, the larger volumetric flows lead to higher gas velocities, which results in more turbulent flow and hence reduced concentration polarization inside the modules.

Fig. 8. Long term testing of HFTM for a period of 15 days operated at 60 °C, 1.7 bar feed pressure with permeate side under vacuum at 0.2 bar (the feed compositions are measured at 115 °C).

Table 4  
Viscosity and CO₂ solubility changes of mobile carriers with temperature. Data obtained from [28,29].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Temperature (°C)</th>
<th>ProK*</th>
<th>[Emim][OAc]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dynamic viscosity (mPa s⁻¹)</td>
<td>CO₂ solubility (mole fraction)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>2.4092</td>
<td>0.674</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>1.400</td>
<td>0.594</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* 2.5 M solution in water.
with exposure of SO$_2$ and NO, at a composition of 630 ppm(v) and 380 ppm(v) in simulated flue gas, respectively. Only the HFTMs with mobile carriers were chosen for this test as the host polymer matrix in these membranes is similar to that of the HFTM and additionally contain small organic molecules (mobile carriers), which can be more prone to degradation. The compositions of SO$_2$ and NO were measured both at the feed and retentate side and the corresponding CO$_2$ purity in the permeate side of the membranes were monitored over time, as seen in Fig. 9. Both HFTMs containing [Emim][OAc] and ProK exhibited no changes in CO$_2$ purity on the permeate stream during these tests, indicating that SO$_2$ and NO had a negligible effect on the CO$_2$ transport. The effluent SO$_2$ and NO concentration achieved stable values in different time periods based on the composition of the membrane material. Both HFTMs concentrated SO$_2$ and NO on the permeate side, indicating high SO$_2$ and NO permeabilities in these membranes. Generally, SO$_2$ is expected to react with carriers and compete with CO$_2$ transport in facilitated transport membranes due to its high reactivity [41]. Additionally, due to their acidic nature, both SO$_2$ and NO change the pH of the system.

Fig. 9. Effect of SO$_2$ and NO$_x$ on HFTMs with mobile carriers – Effect of (A) NO and (B) SO$_2$ on CO$_2$ purity of HFTM with 10% [Emim][OAc]; Effect of (C) NO and (D) SO$_2$ on CO$_2$ purity of HFTM with 20% ProK (Average feed SO$_2$ composition = ~630 ppm(v); NO composition = ~380 ppm(v); membranes operated at 21 °C; 1.7 bar feed pressure; permeate side under vacuum at 0.2 bar).

Fig. 10. Effect of stage-cut (A) and membrane area requirement (B) on CO$_2$ recovery and CO$_2$ purity (B) of HFTMs (simulated for flue gas at 60 °C; 1.7 bar feed pressure; permeate side under vacuum at 0.2 bar).
which in turn regulates permeation performance \[42\]. However, the results from the current study confirm the trend of facilitated transport membranes that documented stable performances after exposure to both SO\(_2\) and NO\(_x\) \[31,43\]. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the reactivity of both acidic gases with amines in the presence of water is highly dependent on temperature \[44\]. In the current study, the temperature of operation was maintained to 21\(^\circ\)C due to practical limitations, although the long-term studies document similar stability to SO\(_2\) and NO\(_x\) (Fig. 8), albeit at lower concentrations but extended operation time.

### 3.5. Stage-cut analysis

The separation capabilities of developed HFTMs when used in a single-stage membrane process were studied using a process simulation analysis with Aspen HYSYS V9.0. The similar flow diagram, as described in Fig. 5, was used for this purpose. The validated permeance and selectivity obtained through experimental data (Table 3) served as the basis for these simulations.

The effect of stage-cut on both CO\(_2\) purity and recovery was studied by varying the membrane area in m\(^2\) in the simulated process. As seen in Fig. 10, increasing stage-cut increases the recovery of the membrane while significantly affecting the purity of the processed stream. In this study, since the field testing which corresponded to the lowest stage-cut, the conditions of field test yielded the highest obtainable purity. The achievable CO\(_2\) purity in the treated stream after a single-stage purification is in the range of membranes reported earlier \[12,45,46\]. Such high purity in a single-stage is beneficial to achieve an economically favourable CO\(_2\) capture and purity. Nevertheless, the economic benefit of the fabricated membranes, especially with the ones containing mobile carriers, is clearly established in terms of the membrane area requirement for the same target recovery in Fig. 10B. It can be seen that the use of mobile carriers significantly reduced the membrane area requirement and hence can correlate to major savings in terms of membrane capital costs \[47\]. For instance, to achieve a CO\(_2\) recovery target of 90%, the HFTMs containing mobile carriers required ~33% lower membrane area when compared to HFTMs. Similar benefits are obtained with purity CO\(_2\) targets (Fig. 10B).

In order to benchmark the developed membranes with potential membranes for CO\(_2\) separation, the performance of the current membranes as a single-stage separation unit has been compared with other hollow fiber CO\(_2\) separation membranes with validation in pre-pilot scale or higher as seen in Table 5.

### 4. Conclusions

Hollow fiber modules with hybrid facilitated transport membranes were fabricated in the pre-pilot scale and tested in field conditions using real flue gas at a cement plant. Operation conditions such as feed pressure, temperature and pressure ratio were optimized to maximize separation using hybrid facilitated transport membrane. The HFTMs containing mobile carriers clearly showed improved performances than the neat HFTMs, indicating the advantages of CO\(_2\)-philic additives in membranes for post-combustion capture. Higher water content in the feed stream led to better performances, but temperature fluctuations close to saturation might risk water condensation in the modules. Elevated temperature and reliable water profile in the real flue gas enhanced the permeation properties of the membrane modules when compared to the labscale tests. Long-term testing of HFTM in untreated flue gas revealed the good performance durability of the membrane for a period of two weeks. The HFTMs with mobile carriers were subjected to resistance testing for SO\(_2\) and NO impurities in simulated flue gas, and no obvious changes in CO\(_2\) permeate purity were obtained. Simulation studies reveal that, to achieve the first stage separation of a typical post-combustion capture process, use of the fabricated membranes leads to significant improvements in the separation performance compared to the currently available hollow fiber membranes tested at pre-pilot scale or higher, thus leading to decreased membrane area requirements. However, to further study the cost benefits of the HFTMs in a large scale process, extended exposure tests should be performed in order to estimate the membrane life time. Nevertheless, the developed high-performance membranes tested in the relevant environment strengthens the commercial potential of implementing membrane technology in CO\(_2\) separation applications.

### Author contributions

S.J. L.A. and L.D. designed the experiments. S.J. and A.L. fabricated the membranes, S.J., F.S., R.C., and G.M.N. performed the permeation tests in the field. K.M. carried out tests at PACT and analyzed the corresponding results. S.J. analysed all the other results and wrote the manuscript. L.D. conceived the original idea, planned the overall study and supervised the research work.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

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.

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### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/jcej.2020.127405.