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3D heated mould tool development for the manufacture of PLA matrix composites via in situ polymerization (ISP) during monomer infusion under flexible tooling (MIFT)

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Abstract

Due to the greater awareness of the environmental issues, the use of “greener” materials to substitute for synthetic fibre reinforcements and petrochemical polymer matrices is growing rapidly. Therefore, to minimise the ecological impact, the SeaBioComp project aims to produce natural fibre bio-based thermoplastic composites for marine applications. The University of Plymouth is developing monomer infusion under flexible tooling (MIFT) for the manufacture of bio-based composites via in situ polymerisation (ISP). The monomer material selection identified methyl methacrylate (MMA) for PMMA and L-lactide for PLA as potential matrix systems for marine composites. MMA can be processed at ambient temperature in a similar manner to conventional thermoset epoxy and polyester resins. However, L-lactide requires an elevated temperature between 100–200°C. There is a trend in using out of oven/autoclave processing for composite production due to the advantages including energy saving, lower equipment and operational costs, flexible in temperature adjustment, etc. Therefore, integrally heated mould tool attracts increasing attention, especially for large composite structure production.

This report reviews the suitable materials for the mould tool and heating elements available on the market. Most importantly, the design of a 3D heated mould tool for an offshore wind turbine nacelle cover demonstrator is presented, and the achievement of sensible thermal uniformity has been investigated using an infrared camera as the temperature has a significant influence on the property of the final composite structure.

Keywords: Thermoplastic; Monomer, Infusion; Heated Mould Tool.

1 Introduction

As an economical, clean method, Resin Infusion under Flexible Tooling (RIFT) has been widely used for the manufacture of large composite structures with high fibre volume fraction. RIFT is similar to Resin Transfer Moulding (RTM), with one mould face replaced by a flexible vacuum film [1-3]. In RIFT, it is common to flood one surface of the laminate with resin in a flow medium (a.k.a. transport mesh) to expedite fill by through-thickness flow [4]. In this SeaBioComp project, the University of Plymouth is using the RIFT method to produce natural fibre reinforced thermoplastic matrix marine composites via in situ polymerisation (ISP). The process will be referred to as Monomer Infusion under Flexible Tooling (MIFT). By considering the requirement of viscosity, water uptake, processing temperature, etc., methyl methacrylate (MMA) and L-lactide were reported to be suitable monomer candidates for ISP [5]. Similar to conventional thermoset resins, the process for MMA is straightforward and can be conducted at ambient temperature. It is anticipated that bio-based MMA will be commercially available in the near future, it is not available as a bio-monomer yet in this project. L-lactide monomer is produced from the fermentation of 100% natural and renewable agricultural resources [6], nevertheless high processing temperature (usually 100–200 °C) is required for the MIFT process. Furthermore, the ISP temperature has a significant influence on the molecular weight, conversion rate, crystallinity of the final polylactic acid (PLA) polymer, which in consequence will affect the properties of PLA matrix composite [7]. Therefore, maintenance of the uniformity of thermal field will be a key factor in composite production.

One of the major objectives by University of Plymouth in SeaBioComp project is to produce a 3D natural fibre reinforced thermoplastic composite demonstrator by MIFT via ISP. To enable composite production based on both MMA & L-lactide monomers, and also provide experiences for the out of oven/autoclave, a 3D heated mould tool with sensible temperature uniformity is discussed and developed in this report.

2 Mould tools

2.1 Mould tool materials

A good mould tool is crucial for the successful, effective, and efficient manufacture of a 3D composite structure. As discussed in D1.4.1.2, "The tool should have adequate rigidity to maintain dimensional tolerances, generous curvature at corners to avoid fibre bridging, and often needs to be vacuum-tight for specific processes." The normal materials utilised for mould tools for composite production include: metal, wood, composites etc. [8].

Stewart [9] reported a trend towards lighter-weight, durable composite tooling due to the increase industrial demand of large-scale composite. Invar, a nickel-steel alloy, has long been the tooling material of choice for high-volume runs of composite parts because of its durability and a coefficient of thermal expansion close to that of the reinforced plastics. However, with the increasing size of the composite structure, the disadvantage of excessive weight and high cost in machining the metal made composite engineers more interested in using carbon fibre composite as the tooling material. Stewart also summarised that bismaleimide (BMI), epoxy and novel low-shrink resin systems can all be used for the composite tooling, with the highest working temperature up to 250°C, as well as the advantages including repairable, dimensionally stable and the ability to hold vacuum integrity. DURATOOL 450 BMI/carbon fibre tooling prepreg from Cytec Engineered Materials [10], HTM 556 and HTM 515-1 tooling prepregs from the Advanced Composites Group (ACG) [11] and HX series of low temperature epoxy tooling prepregs provided by Amber Composites [12] are all available composite prepregs for composite tooling on the market. There are also commercial available machinable core materials for composite tooling, for example: GrafTech International's GRAFOAM® carbon foam [13], CB1100 ceramic tooling block material from ACG [11], a structural material CFOAM® made from coal provided by Touchstone Research Laboratory [14], etc.

2.2 Heating systems

It was reported in deliverable D.1.4.1.2 "Heated mould tool development for bio-based composite manufacture" that the heating techniques include:

- conductive heat transfer using (gas-, oil or steam-) heated (metal) bodies
- convection of heated (inert) gas
- combined radiation and convection heating using an open flame
- local or scanned laser radiation
- ceramic long-to-medium wavelength infrared heaters
- quartz medium-to-short wavelength lamps
- microwave, induction or radio-frequency heating
- electrical cartridge or resistance elements
- ultrasonic heating

Following the discussion in D.1.4.1.4, this report will also focus on the out of oven conductive heating using embedded heating elements. Out of oven heating method usually possesses the advantages of energy saving and more rapid heating, as it minimises parasitic heating of air in the oven. Therefore, the production method is more suitable towards "green" composites. In addition, out of oven is more suitable for the production of large composites production, e.g. wind turbine blade, as it has no limitation of the structural dimension and saves the capital investment of the expensive equipment.

Heated fabrics are most widely used for out-of-oven integrally heated mould tools. The heating elements can be either positioned at the primary tool face or flexible secondary tool face in MIFT process.

The commercial available heated fabrics include:

1. Fibretemp® system [15] is an energy-efficient temperature control system for moulds in fibre reinforced composite manufacturing. By applying an electric potential on electroconductive carbon fibres (with much lower conductivity than metallic materials such as aluminium or copper), they can be used as a heat source in resistance heaters. Heat is generated through the electric resistance of the carbon fibres. The very low thermal expansion coefficient of carbon fibres ensures a high dimensional stability of the mould in a corresponding structure, so that they remain free of distortion and have exceptional dimensional stability in the mould even at high temperature

gradients. Due to the good drapability of heating carbon fibre fabrics, complex geometries can be equipped with Fibretemp® system, application temperatures up to 260 °C have already been achieved.

2. Tibgrid® [16] heating fabric provided by TIBTECH uses PTFE, MFA, PFA or equivalent coated heating wires. This heating system possesses surface power ranging from 500 to 7000 Watts/m², and is capable of achieving a maximum temperature of 240°C. Other applications of Tibgrid® include aircraft de-icing and pre-heating of composite fuel tank, fluid transfer pipes, engines or battery casing in cold regions. Furthermore, TIBTECH also supplies another elastic heating textile Tibgrid-Stretch, which is made by attaching the electrical heating circuit to an elastic fabric. It allows easier layout on complex shapes, or to follow curves on a flat surface. Therefore, it can be perfectly adapted to the complex shape composite manufacture out-of-autoclave.
3. CoTexx® [17] knitted heating fabric is an electrical resistance heating made of copper litz (enamelled) wire. The knitting of fine resistance wires makes CoTexx® flexible, therefore adaptable to complex contours. This product is able to achieve a maximum working temperature of 200°C with the benefit of identical heating power at any location and no hot spots. By means of CoTexx®, self-heated-mould for the production of composite structures can be manufactured or integrated. The benefit of this product according to the supplier includes: (1) no hot spot due to parallel connection, (2) stable regulating circuit for the temperature control, (3) gentle transfer of large heating capacities, etc. CoTexx® can be used for (1) heating of tools for FRP manufacturing, (2) de-icing in aerospace applications.

Heated fluids

Another heating method is heated fluid circulation through channels or piping mounted on the tool back surface. This is a well-established heating technique by utilising the circulating water or oil through the pipes (usually embedded on the back of the tool) [18,19]. Hot oil circulation heating of metal tooling can achieve high heating rates and has been applied in the wind energy field. Another major advantage of this fluid heating system is that can be used reversely, to cool the tool/composite following curing. However, special hoses and tubes are necessary, this will increase the costs for the heating system significantly; and the pipeline work is also time and labour consuming. In addition, the difference in temperature between the outlet and inlet pipe is also a problem [20].

The Quickstep process developed by Quickstep Technologies (Australia) should be mentioned here [21,22]. Instead of the air in the oven, this method utilises a liquid heat transfer fluid to heat or cool the composite structure. In the Quickstep process, the tool with the uncured composite component are sealed in a vacuum bag and then placed in a low-pressure pressure chamber of the heating/cooling liquid. This method has the benefits of rapid heating/cooling and lower tooling cost in composite production; nevertheless, Quickstep is still a liquid in-oven method in principle as there is still a limitation in composite dimension and a large proportion of the energy is consumed in heating/cooling the liquid fluid. In consequence, the Quickstep method will not be applied in this report.

Other heating technology

Buckypaper is a thin sheet (porous structure) made from an aggregate of carbon nanotubes, and its composites could be applied in the electrically conductive fields [23,24]. Tarfaoui et al [25] developed self-heating/deicing composites using Buckypaper within the composite. It was observed that the composite can be heated up in a short time-period by an electrical power, which implied an excellent heating performance of the Buckypaper. It was also speculated that Buckypaper may exhibit a better thermal conducting performance not only in the plane but also more importantly along the thickness direction, compared with graphite films [26]. Nguyen et al [27] have successfully prepared carbon fibre/Buckypaper hybrid composites by in situ Joule heating with Buckypaper (up to 177°C). Characterisation results demonstrated that composites fabricated by this out-of-autoclave curing method exhibited relatively good mechanical properties and low void content. In addition, finite element analysis indicated that this method had the advantages including uniform heat distribution and energy efficiency. Therefore, Buckypaper heating is a promising technique for composite curing with potential for energy & cost savings.

Many researchers have investigated the application of integrally heated mould tool in composite production. Liu et al [28] reported an out-of-oven curing method by integrating a pyroresistive surface layer (based on graphene nanoplatelets and high density polyethylene) into a composite laminate. The developed surface layer possessed a positive temperature coefficient, which enables a separation of the conductive network when reaching at the predetermined temperature to prevent the overheating. It also had good flexibility for the manufacturing of structures with complex shapes. Compared to state-of-the-art out-of-autoclave oven curing, the proposed out-of-oven Joule heating approach consumed only 1% of the energy required for curing, with no effect on mechanical performance and glass transition temperature (T_g) of the final composite.

Abdalahman et al [29] studied the design optimisation of an integrally-heated tool numerically using Taguchi methodology. It was found that the heating channel layout is the most crucial parameters for the thermal performance of the integrally-heated tool, and parallel layout proved to be the most efficient to achieve the desired characteristics of surface temperature uniformity and minimum heating time. In addition, channel cross-section showed very little influence on heating efficiency, while the heating channel separation need to be determined according to the production requirement. Bromley [30] investigated integrally-heated tooling and thermal modelling methodologies for the rapid cure of aerospace composites. He "recommended to use a reliable oven for the large majority of the part that does not need the active temperature control provided by integrally heated tooling and only use the localised heating control for the thickest portions of the laminate". He also said "heating a part from the underside of the tool face while utilising an insulation blanket over the top does appear to provide benefits over oven curing for certain part families, and can lead to faster cure times. The energy usage difference, although theoretically less, is not as great as anticipated, due to ovens being more efficient than previously thought". However, the analysis was for relatively small parts compared to those intended after the culmination of the SeaBioComp project.

3 Demonstrator components

Discussions on demonstrator components were held with two companies interested to use biocomposites in the marine environment.

Siemens Gamesa Renewable Energy (SGRE in UK and Germany) required a Non-Disclosure Agreement to discuss potential SeaBioComp demonstrator components. They proposed that the demonstrator might be either (a) a wind turbine spinner or (b) a wind turbine nacelle cover. The component is normally mounted at the top of the support tower and as such is sensibly remote from exposure to the full rigours of the marine environment.

JET Engineering is developing a network of 5G telecommunication buoys to provide mobile phone and data connectivity at sea [31-36]. The proposed system floats on a ~1.2 m diameter buoy with a domed housing for the telecommunications equipment surrounded by solar panels. In the first instance, the complex curvature of the dome provides an interesting challenge for "wiring" an electrically heated mould tool (and electrically heated silicone membrane counterface) and is chosen as the demonstrator component. The shape has similar characteristics to the spinner (nose cone) of a wind turbine without the added complexity of the blade apertures.

4 Conclusion

This report reviews the suitable materials for the mould tool and heating elements available on the market. Most importantly, the design of a 3D heated mould tool for an offshore wind turbine nacelle cover demonstrator is presented, and the achievement of sensible thermal uniformity has been investigated using an infrared camera as the temperature has a significant influence on the property of the final composite structure.

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