

# REGRESSION-BASED OPTIMIZATION OF THE PARTIAL OXIDATION OF METHANE ON NI-MGO/ $\alpha$ -ALUMINA MONOLITH CATALYST IN A REVERSE-FLOW REACTOR

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## Abstract

This study describes the use of statistical optimization techniques on a laboratory scale reverse flow reactor for the catalytic partial oxidation of methane on Ni-MgO/ $\alpha$ -alumina monolith catalyst. The effects of initial temperature ( $T_{ini}$ ), switching time ( $\tau$ ), total flow rate ( $F$ ), mole fraction of methane ( $M$ ), and catalyst length on hydrogen yield and methane conversion are investigated using systematic experimental design. In the first experimental phase, the steepest ascent path was established by ridge analysis to determine the stationary point. The optimum operating conditions were determined in the second experimental phase. The following interactions were found to be significant for methane conversion:  $M*\tau$ ,  $F*\tau$  and  $M*F$ . The interaction of  $F*\tau$  also affected the hydrogen yield. The third-order interaction of  $F*\tau*M$  was also found to be statistically significant. The optimum methane conversion value of 57.36% could be obtained by setting switching time, total flow rate and a mole fraction of methane of 4.24 minutes, 543ml/min and 0.6043, respectively. The optimum value of hydrogen yield of 36.73% was reached by setting total flow rate, mole fraction of methane and switching time of 540ml/min, 0.5845 and 4.15 minutes, respectively. The analysis of reactor operation showed that optimization of the system required changing more than one factor and that there is a complex interplay of the different experimental factors. The influence of the factors may all be interpreted in terms of heat release and heat loss in the system.

**Keywords:** Experimental Design, Monolith Catalyst, Optimization, Partial Oxidation Methane, Reverse Flow Reactor

## Introduction

Hydrogen is commonly produced by steam-reforming natural gas. However, steam reforming is an endothermic process in which an external heat source is always required. This process also releases a large amount of carbon dioxide. In the past few years, there has been an increasingly strong interest in the catalytic partial oxidation of methane (POM). This is motivated by a high demand for compact and low capital-cost reactors for the conversion of natural gas to produce synthesis gas for production of liquids fuel and hydrogen used for fuel cells [1].

The POM, which is a mildly exothermic reaction, can be conducted autothermally in a reverse flow reactor (RFR) wherein the direction of flow is reversed at specified periods of time. The duration of time between flow reversals is called a half-cycle and the period required to complete a half-cycle is called the switching time. The idea behind the

approach is to store and utilize the heat of exothermic reaction within the catalyst bed itself. The RFR has become a promising technology for producing synthesis gas using POM. Thermal energy released from weakly exothermic reactions can be stored by the two inert sections at both ends of the reactor. The temperature of the product is lowered by the outlet section and at the same time the temperature of the feed stream is raised by the inlet section before reaching the catalyst reaction zone. During start-up, the reactor is preheated to establish an initial temperature profile which enables sustained autothermal operation to be achieved. After this initial preheating, all external sources of heat are removed. The partial oxidation of methane in an RFR may have many advantages in saving energy and expenses for investment and operation, since it is not necessary to supply external heat to maintain a high temperature.

The implementation of the partial oxidation of methane in an RFR in the real world is complex because of the inherently unsteady state operation and the many parameters that affect it. Recently published studies have focused mainly on numerical simulation and control strategy, but there have been few published experimental studies. The simulation of a RFR using mathematical models is necessary to determine the parameters which affect the reactor performance [2-4]. However, establishing a mechanistic model which captures all of the complexities of the RFR is an extremely difficult endeavor since each half-cycle involves the solution of a system of partial differential equations.

The determination of the behavior and the characteristics of a real RFR using experimental design tools may give more understanding regarding how to operate the reactor in reality. In this study, the hydrogen yield and conversion of methane of partial oxidation of methane in a real laboratory-scale RFR is optimized using the method of steepest ascent by changing five factors: switching time, total flow rate, the molar fraction of methane; catalyst length and initial temperature.

## Literature Review

### Partial Oxidation of Methane in a Reverse Flow Reactor

The catalyst in the partial oxidation of methane has an important role. Mitri et al. [5] investigated the catalytic partial oxidation of methane to synthesis gas at high temperature and short contact time conditions over three different noble metal catalysts (Pt, Rh, and Ir). The experimental results showed that reverse flow operation led to strong improvements in synthesis gas yields for all three catalysts, with particularly strong improvements for poorly performing catalysts. Furthermore, as the catalyst temperature increased, resulting in an accelerated deactivation of the unstable catalysts (Pt, Ir), the heat integration completely compensated for this acceleration. Therefore, reverse flow operation has an intrinsic “equalizing” and “self-regulating” effect on catalyst performance and offers a widely applicable reactor engineering approach to compensate for the poor or degrading catalysts in high temperature partial oxidations with noble metal-based catalysts. Hevia et al. [6] also analyzed the role of the catalyst properties, such as the different activities and thermal stabilities of the studied catalysts, on the performance of reverse flow reactors for the combustion of lean methane-air mixtures. The noble-metal catalysts are more appropriate for leaner and stable mixture with closely constant composition; on the other hand, the metal-oxide catalysts are more appropriate for richer mixtures, allowing concentration variations to some extent.

In recent studies, the effect of steam on the partial oxidation of methane in a reverse flow reactor has been mentioned. There are two approaches to demonstrate this influence. In the study of Dobrego et al. [7], steam was mentioned as a positive factor. The hydrogen yield and the methane-to-hydrogen conversion ratio may be increased by the addition of

steam to a working mixture. Bos et al. [8], however, mentioned steam as a catalyst poison, moreover, the presence of steam may assist the steam-reforming process in the reactor.

The optimization of a reverse flow reactor is complex and difficult because it is a combination of the cyclic process and the catalytic reactor. This may be the reason why very few studies mention the optimization of this kind of reactor, especially in experimental optimization. However, some studies tried to analyze the behavior of a reverse flow reactor by modeling and simulation. Litto et al. [9] used simulation method to investigate the operation factors that affect a reverse flow reactor. Thermal properties (including thermal mass and thermal conductivity), interaction between switching time and superficial gas velocity and geometric parameters (which include diameter of reactor and thickness of insulation) were found to have strong effects on the behaviors of reverse flow reactor. Salomons et al. [10], based on the experiments performed from catalytic combustion of lean methane mixture in the reverse flow reactor, found that it is possible to maintain auto-thermal operation of the reactor at methane concentrations as low as 0.22% with feed at ambient temperature. The overall performance of the system is dependent on methane concentration, cycle time and velocity. A large disparity between the peak temperature and the extraction temperature may decrease the efficiency of energy recovery. The study of Salomons et al. [10] also indicated the presence of radial gradients in the reactor. These gradients are expected to affect reactor performance, and must be considered when evaluating the dynamics of the reactor. Litto et al. [9] also confirmed that the primary scaling parameter is the reactor diameter; special care must be paid to this variable, especially in large units where the wall effects are expected to be minimal and the two-dimensional behavior of the reactor cannot be ignored in smaller units.

In general, some parameters of the reverse flow reactor were investigated and have been determined to be the significant factors such as the catalyst [5, 6], the initial flow rate [11], the molar feed ratio [12,13], the switching time [14, 15], the thickness of an insulator, the dimensions (length and diameter) of a reverse flow reactor [9]. However, the optimal values of these factors in a real reverse flow reactor have not been recommended. These optimal values are not only significant to this specific reactor but also to be reused in other studies using the similitude analysis and the dimensionless parameters. Therefore, the optimization of the partial oxidation of methane in a reverse flow reactor is necessary.

### **Method of Steepest Ascent in the Optimization of a Catalytic Reactor**

The method of steepest ascent is a simple, economical and efficient procedure developed to move the experimental region of a response in the direction of the maximum change toward the optimum [16]. If there are many factors in the system, the factors can be screened by the Plackett–Burman design to eliminate the insignificant factors before using this method. Anunziata and Cussa [17] successfully optimized the activation of methane using ethane as co-reactant into higher hydrocarbons on Zn-containing zeolite catalyst using this method. There were four independent variables: time on stream, space velocity of ethane, molar fraction of methane and reaction temperature. The dependent variables were the methane conversion, reducing the operation costs, achieving efficiency and effectiveness of methane activation process. The results indicated that the reaction time, the interactions of the time on stream and temperature significantly affect methane conversion. Reese et al. [18] also used the steepest ascent method to maximize hydrogen production per mole of supplied oxygen in a laboratory-scale catalytic autothermal reformer. Oxygen-to-carbon and water-to-carbon ratios were used as independent variables. Surface response methodology was employed using a  $2^2$  factorial design. The optimal experimental conditions occurred at the water-to-carbon ratio of 3.00–3.35 and the oxygen-to-carbon ratio of 0.44–0.48.

The results from previous studies have confirmed the validity and capability of the method of steepest ascent in an autothermal reactor. The steepest ascent method seems to be widely used in many fields. However, there have been no published experimental studies about a reverse flow reactor using this method.

## Methodology

### Reactor Design

The experiments were performed in a reverse-flow reactor system depicted in Figure 1. All experiments were conducted high temperature tubular reactor which uses a 1-m long Inconel tube with a 2-cm diameter (Figure 2). The middle part of reactor was equipped with an electric resistance wire to provide the heat prior to start-up. To reduce heat loss, the reactor was encased in a stainless steel tube with a 60-mm diameter stainless steel shell which was then evacuated with a vacuum pump. The exterior of this shell was insulated using 120-mm thick ceramic wool. The direction of the flow was reversed by two three-way solenoid valves connected to the switching-time controller.

### Catalyst Preparation

The catalyst used in this study was Ni-MgO/ $\alpha$ -alumina prepared by co-precipitation method. The method was first studied by Doan [19]. This catalyst was made by using ammonia solution (10-15%) slowly poured into a solution of Ni(NO<sub>3</sub>)<sub>2</sub> (Purity 98%, Analytical Grade) and Mg(NO<sub>3</sub>)<sub>2</sub> (Purity 99%, Analytical Grade) in the presence of  $\alpha$ -alumina (Purity 99.7%, Analytical Grade, powder form) up to pH 11 at low temperature to prevent the evaporation of ammonia. The catalyst was decanted with water six times then dried in air at 80°C for 4 hours and calcined in air at 900°C for 4 hours before coating onto monolith surface.

A 15 mm piece of cordierite monolith, obtained from NGK, was coated with NiO-MgO/ $\alpha$ -alumina catalyst. The cordierite monolith had a diameter of 20 mm and consists of around 154 channels. This is equivalent to 300 cells per square inch. Each channel had a 1 mm<sup>2</sup> square cross-section. The slurry for coating catalyst onto monolith was prepared by vigorously stirring the finely milled mixture of catalyst and  $\alpha$ -alumina in PVA (polyvinyl alcohol) solution. The fresh monolith was dipped into the slurry and the excess catalyst suspension was blown out by compressed air before drying. This step was repeated until the needed catalyst loading onto monolith was attained. In these experiments, a Ni catalyst loading of 2% and a catalyst-binder ratio of 2:1 was used. Before using the coated

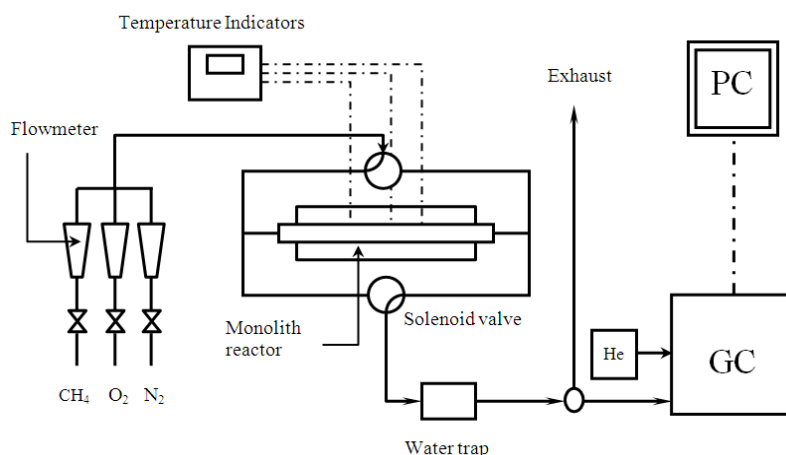


Figure 1. Schematic of experimental setup

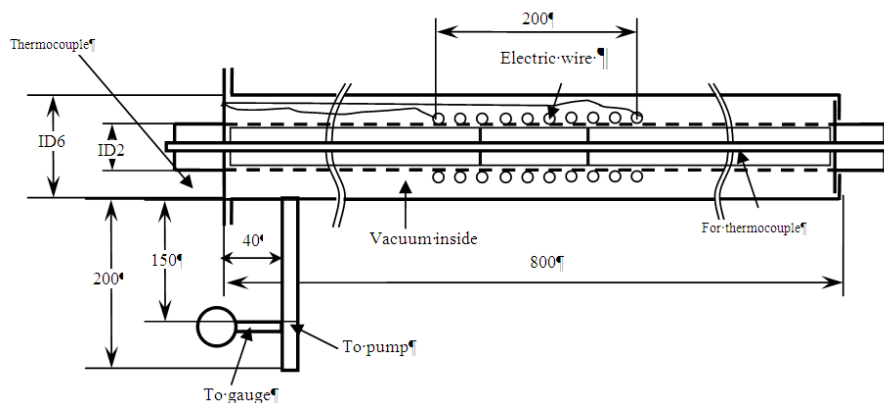


Figure 2. Schematic of reverse flow reactor

monolith for reaction, the coated monolith was calcined in air at 900°C for 4 hours and then reduced under hydrogen flowing at 120 ml/min at 900°C for 2 hours to activate the catalyst. The results from X-ray diffraction showed that solid solutions of NiO and MgO were formed. NiO and MgO are completely miscible and form an ideal solid solution because of the similar structures. It was also confirmed that the  $\gamma$ -Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> was changed to  $\alpha$ -Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> at 900°C during calcination. The catalyst has a surface area of 35.2 m<sup>2</sup>/g and a pore volume of 10.61 m<sup>3</sup>/g and pore size of 13.15 nm. Elemental analysis showed that distribution of nickel on coated monolith catalyst was not uniform. The nickel loading of 2% was found in the middle of the monolith catalyst while the ends have significantly different values [20]. However, distribution of magnesium was consistent all throughout the monolith. Based on the temperature-programmed desorption, the catalyst had a large amount of basic sites and seems to be stable in hindering carbon deposition on the surface of the catalyst [20]. Activity testing before and after long periods of use showed that the catalyst was fairly stable within the time frame of the experiments. The total surface area of the catalyst available for carbon deposition is very small compared to the total quantity of gases passed through the system. Hence, it cannot be expected that a mass balance will be able to quantify any carbon deposition.

Coated monoliths were placed to form the desired length of the reacting section. Uncoated monoliths were placed in front of and behind the catalyst coated monolith until a total length of 1 meter was reached. A 3-mm quartz tube was inserted through the center of the monolith to serve as a channel for the thermocouples in order to monitor the temperature along the reactor axis during operation. The reactor was operated at slightly above atmospheric pressure.

## Reactor Operation

Before starting each run, the RFR was preheated with the furnace to establish the initial temperature profile inside the reactor. A typical initial temperature profile is represented in Figure 3. Nitrogen was fed for one minute to purge the reactor during start-up. The electrical heating was then discontinued after required initial temperature profile was achieved. The highest temperature within this initial temperature profile is represented as  $T_{ini}$  and is used to represent the entire profile. Once the desired  $T_{ini}$  was achieved, the feed of nitrogen and heating were terminated. The reactor was activated by feeding methane followed by oxygen. The reactor feeds were kept at room temperature in all experimental runs. All gases used in experiments were 99.9% purity. Only methane and oxygen were fed

to the reactor during the experiments. Therefore, an increase of the mole fraction of methane decreases the mole fraction of oxygen and vice-versa.

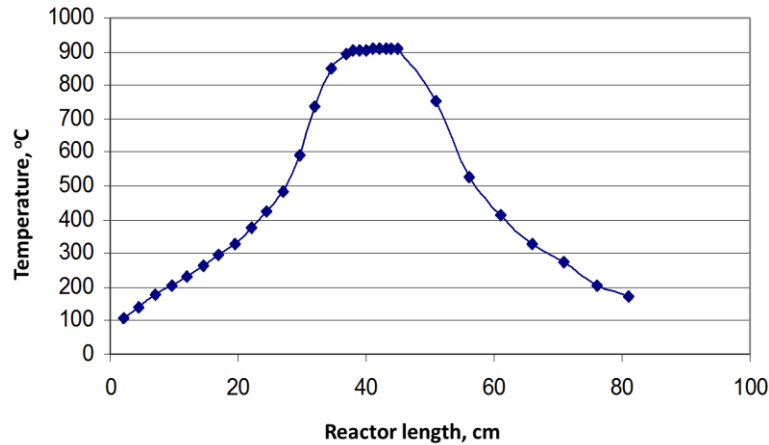


Figure 3. Initial temperature profile before operating the reverse-flow reactor

During the experiment, the temperatures were recorded by a type K thermocouple which was placed at the middle of the reactor axis. The water in the effluent was removed by an ice trap before entering the gas chromatograph (Trace GC Ultra) where the gas compositions were analyzed. A typical temperature record of the reactor in cyclic steady state wherein a measurable conversion is achieved is shown in Figure 4. The yield and conversion were computed using the equations (1) and (2).

$$X_{CH_4} = 1 - \frac{\% \text{moles of } CH_4}{\% \text{moles of } CO + \% \text{moles of } CO_2 + \% \text{moles of } CH_4} \quad (1)$$

$$Y_{H_2} = \frac{\% \text{moles of } H_2}{2 \cdot (\% \text{moles of } CO + \% \text{moles of } CO_2 + \% \text{moles of } CH_4)} \quad (2)$$

### The Method of Steepest Ascent

In this study, the method of steepest ascent was used to optimize the system. In this method, a steepest ascent path is determined by ridge analysis in the initial experimental phase. The succeeding experiments are conducted along the path until the stationary point is reached.

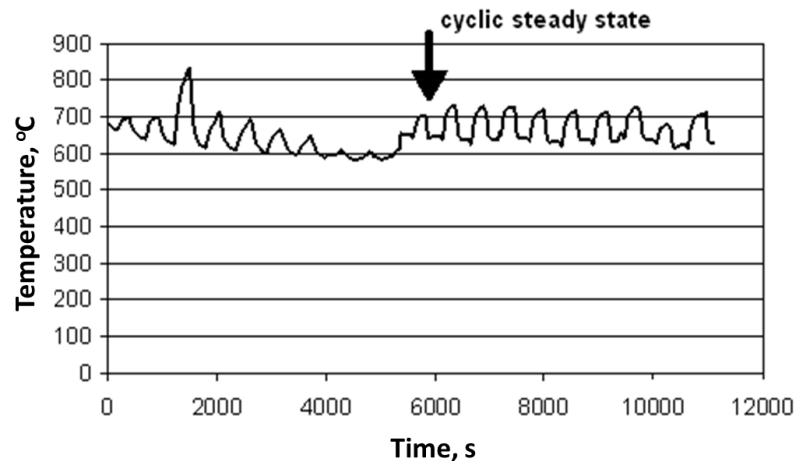


Figure 4. The temperature record at the middle of the reactor, at initial temperature of 750°C, CH<sub>4</sub>/O<sub>2</sub> of 300/150 ml/min, 4-minute switching time of and 180-mm catalyst length

The responses of the stationary point are the largest compared to the other the path. The second experimental phase consists of a design established around the stationary point. The nature of the stationary point and a new steepest ascent path are determined by canonical analysis and ridge analysis, respectively, in the second experimental phase. This process is repeated until the stationary point is determined as a maximum point [21]. In this study, two experimental phase and one steepest ascent path were established to determine the maximum point. Ridge, canonical and regression analysis was done by SAT/STAT<sup>®</sup> using REG and RSREG procedures.

### The Factor Space Boundaries

According to Neumann [18], partial oxidation of methane in a reverse flow reactor should be operated at minimum initial temperature of 400°C. Operation below the temperature can cause extinction of the reaction. However, it is not recommended to operate the reactor at the initial temperature higher than 900°C. The insulator materials can lose effectiveness under the thermal stress of such a temperature. In the interest of safety, the initial temperature should be lower than 900°C. The resolution of temperature in this study is 4°C. This is derived from the error in the thermocouple reading.

The total flow rate of reactants can be established from 150ml/min to 1500ml/min. The values are limited by the capacity of the flow meters. These limits are determined by assigning the superficial gas velocity from 0.5 to 5 cm/s. The velocities in this range ensure adequate residence time for reaction. In this study, the flow rate of methane and oxygen were measured separately. The errors of the methane and oxygen flow meters are 10 ml/min and 5 ml/min respectively. Since the total flow rate is determined by adding methane flow rate and oxygen flow rate, the error of total flow rate is 15ml/min.

Mitri et al. [5] recommended that molar feed ratio between methane and oxygen should be higher than 1.2. According to stoichiometry, the partial oxidation of methane to produce synthesis gas should be done at the molar feed ratio of two. However, the conversion of methane is decreased when there is an increase of the molar feed ratio between methane and oxygen [13]. Therefore, the molar feed ratio was investigated from the values of 1.2 to 2 which are equivalent to the mole fraction methane of 0.54545 to 0.6666.

According to the simulation of Dang [22], the switching time of a reverse flow reactor should be changed within the range from two to five minutes. The reactor was designed based on the simulation of Dang [22]. Therefore, this range is chosen as the boundary of switching time. In this study, the minimum difference between two set values of switching time is 15 seconds. As previously mentioned in the section on catalyst preparation, the monoliths were prepared as small segments, each of length 15mm. In the reactor, the monoliths were placed in pairs because the reactor was symmetrically operated. The number of monoliths in the reactor was even. Therefore, the catalyst length was investigated in discrete steps of 30 mm. The maximum catalyst length was 270mm, the length of the heating zone. The factor space boundaries are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1. Summary of Boundary Conditions of Independent Factors**

Factors	Lower limit	Upper limit	Type of variable
Initial temperature (°C)	400	900	continuous
Catalyst length (mm)	30	270	Discrete step 30mm
Switching time (minute)	2	5	continuous
Mole fraction of methane	0.5454	0.6666	continuous

Factors	Lower limit	Upper limit	Type of variable
Total flow rate (ml/min)	150	1500	continuous

## Results and Discussion

### The First Experimental Phase

In the initial experimental design, the effects of total flow rate, mole fraction of methane, switching time, initial temperature and catalyst length were investigated. The initial design is asymmetrical and the initial temperature was investigated at two levels. Therefore, the quadratic effect of the initial temperature cannot be determined and the quadratic effects and the interaction effects also cannot be analyzed simultaneously. The statistical analysis shows that there are four significant interactions which affect both methane conversion and hydrogen yield. These are the interaction of initial temperature and catalyst zone ( $T_{ini} * L$ ); the interaction of total flow rate and molar fraction of methane ( $F * M$ ), The interaction of molar fraction of methane and switching time ( $M * \tau$ ) and the interaction of switching time and total flow rate ( $\tau * F$ ).

The results from the experiments are shown in Table 2 and the statistical analyses are summarized in Table 3. The resulting equations are shown as Equations (3) and (4)

$$X_{CH_4} = 167.32 + 4.54 * 10^{-4} T_{ini} L - 75.67 * M * \tau + 0.1047 * \tau * F - 0.6325 * F * M \quad (3)$$

$$Y_{H_2} = 55.59 + 2.34 * 10^{-4} T_{ini} L - 26.72 M * \tau + 3.68 * 10^{-2} \tau * F - 0.2297 F * M \quad (4)$$

It is interesting to note that the main effects are insignificant whereas the interaction effects are insignificant. This result is a true indication of the complex interaction of all of these effects together. In other words, the reactor performance cannot be predicted just by adjusting one parameter alone. Other parameters must be considered.

#### *Interaction between Initial Temperature and Catalyst Length*

The effects of the interaction between initial temperature and catalyst length on the methane conversion and the hydrogen yield are statistically significant. This means that when the catalyst zone is short (runs 1-10), the initial temperature does not affect both responses very strongly. Indeed, this can easily be seen even without statistical analysis because the conversion and yield are always zero. The reaction does not ignite when there is a short catalyst zone. In preliminary experiments not reported here, the reactor also never ignited when the catalyst zone was short. This result makes sense because the reactor does not ignite when the initial temperature is high, then it cannot be expected to ignite when the initial temperature is low.

**Table 2. Experimental Results in the Initial Design**

Run	$T_{ini}$ (°C)	L (mm)	$\tau$ min	M	F ml/min	$X_{CH_4}$ (%)	$Y_{H_2}$ (%)
1	900	90	2	0.667	450	0	0
2	900	90	3	0.667	450	0	0
3	900	90	5	0.667	450	0	0
4	900	90	6	0.667	450	0	0
5	900	90	4	0.667	300	0	0



Run	T <sub>ini</sub> (°C)	L (mm)	τ min	M	F ml/min	X <sub>CH<sub>4</sub></sub> (%)	Y <sub>H<sub>2</sub></sub> (%)
6	900	90	4	0.667	375	0	0
7	900	90	4	0.667	525	0	0
8	900	90	4	0.667	600	0	0
9	900	90	4	0.667	750	0	0
10	900	90	5	0.667	450	0	0
11	750	180	3	0.667	450	47.8	29.4
12	750	180	4	0.667	450	30.5	16.7
13	750	180	4	0.625	480	63.9	23.0
14	750	180	4	0.606	495	61.5	28.6
15	750	180	4	0.588	510	68.2	28.5
16	750	180	5	0.667	450	0	0
17	750	270	3	0.667	450	56.2	24.5
18	750	270	4	0.667	450	51.0	31.8
19	750	270	4	0.667	525	58.8	23.7
20	750	270	4	0.667	600	59.5	22.9
21	750	270	4	0.667	675	50.9	30.2
22	750	270	5	0.667	450	54.6	36

**Table 3. Statistically Significant Regression Coefficients in the First Experimental Phase**

Regression coefficients	T <sub>ini</sub> *L	M*τ	τ*F	F*M	R <sup>2</sup>
Methane conversion	4.54×10 <sup>-4</sup> **	-75.67818 **	0.104651 **	-0.632478 **	0.926
Hydrogen Yield	2.34×10 <sup>-4</sup> **	-26.71772 **	0.036825 **	-0.229696 **	0.864

\*\* - Significant at level of confidence of 99%

On the other hand, when the catalyst zone is long (runs 11-16, runs 17-22), the responses become sensitive to the initial temperature. The reason for this effect is that when the catalyst zone is short, the active area may be not enough to sustain the reactions. Therefore, the reactor was extinguished at any value of initial temperature. This means that the initial temperature does not affect the responses when the catalyst zone is short.

However, when the catalyst zone is long, the low initial temperature may not supply enough heat to ignite the reaction but high initial temperature does. When the catalyst zone is long, the active area is increased as increase of initial temperature; hence, the responses are improved. In other words, the responses are sensitive to the initial temperature when the catalyst zone is long.

The interaction of initial temperature and catalyst length is actually the product of these two factors which may be an indicator of the total amount of heat that is available in the





















