

# Corrosion performance of nanocomposite coatings in moist SO<sub>2</sub> environment

Ashish K. Kasar<sup>1</sup>, Muhammad U. Bhutta<sup>2</sup>, Zulfikar A Khan<sup>2,\*</sup>, and Pradeep L. Menezes<sup>1, \*\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Mechanical Engineering, University of Nevada, Reno, NV 89557, USA

<sup>2</sup> NanoCorr, Energy and Modelling (NCEM) Research Group, Department of Design and Engineering, Bournemouth University Talbot Campus, Poole, Dorset, BH12 5BB, UK

\*zkhan@bournemouth.ac.uk, \*\*pmenezes@unr.edu

## Abstract:

This paper presents a study of corrosion behavior of electrodeposited Ni, Ni-Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, Ni-ZrO<sub>2</sub>, and Ni-Graphene (Gr) coatings in moist SO<sub>2</sub> environment. Nanocomposite coatings were deposited on steel substrate by pulse electrodeposition technique with an average thickness of  $9 \pm 1$   $\mu$ m. Coatings were characterized by using nanoindentation and scratch tests to measure their mechanical properties prior to conducting corrosion tests. The corrosion resistance of coatings was evaluated according to G87-02 Method B, employing SO<sub>2</sub> cyclic spray in the presence of moisture followed by drying. The results indicated that the addition of nanoparticles is beneficial both for enhancing mechanical properties and improving the corrosion resistance of these coatings. Higher surface corrosion resistance was observed for Ni-Gr coating. Corrosion behavior of coating was also quantified by open circuit potential measurement in 0.5 M H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub> environment. The results suggest that the nanocomposite Ni coatings have improved corrosion resistance compared to pure Ni coating. This work will bring significant impacts in terms of industrial applications such as architectural, automotive and marine industries in the presence of S-pollutants because it can cause corrosion either due to acid rain or by the reaction of moisture with dry deposition of Sulfur.

**Keywords:** Electrodeposition, Ni coating, nanocomposite coating, moist SO<sub>2</sub> environment.

# 1. Introduction

Ni coatings are mainly applied for protection against corrosion, erosion, and abrasion. Ni coating by electrodeposition method is one of the most technologically and economically suitable techniques. Electrodeposition can be performed in three ways: (i) direct current (DC), (ii) pulse current (PC), and (iii) pulse reverse current (PRC) electrodeposition. The coating developed by DC electrodeposition suffers from poor adhesion, porosity, and undesirable microstructure defects, whereas PC and PRC provide better physical, mechanical, and corrosion properties [1-3]. Additionally, pulse electrodeposition technique can also be used for deposition of composite coatings. Electrodeposition of composite involves co-deposition of various micro or nano metallic, non-metallic or polymer particles within the electrolytic bath with suitable electroplating conditions. Quality of nanocoating is mainly governed by pulse physical parameters, nano constituents, substrate roughness, and coating thickness.

Corrosion failure of coatings combined with wear has been studied recently to develop synergistic wear-corrosion models for prediction of coating failures. Recently reported models[4] attempt to predict wear-corrosion in bulk materials or metals only; therefore, these models lack the capacity to predict the performance of nanocomposite coatings subject to wear and corrosion during their applications. It has been always remained the key issue to predict the precise role of Eigen-stresses, grainsize, porosity and thermal mismatch of nano-composites, as intrinsic nano-mechanics parameters in synergistic wear-corrosion phenomenon [4]. Following from the above rationale and its significance a unified Khan-Nazir II numerical model has been developed and reported [4]. Interfacial characteristics have been studied recently and have suggested that interfacial strength between Ni coating and the substrate can be obtained by controlling interface

roughness and coating thickness [5]. The influence of Ni ion concentration has also been observed to evaluate its effects on the tribological and corrosion properties of pure Ni and Ni-Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> composite coating due to surface roughness and wettability [6]. Some of the Ni composite coatings and their properties are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Properties of electrodeposited Ni-nano composite coatings.

<b>Coating</b>	<b>Particle size</b>	<b>Mechanical properties</b>	<b>Electrochemical properties</b>	<b>Reference</b>
Ni-SiC	SiC: 1.2 $\mu\text{m}$	Knoop Hardness = 900 (4.5 times higher than the steel substrate)	-	[7]
Ni-SiC	SiC: 20 nm	Friction coefficient ( $\mu$ ) of composite coating = 0.25, $\mu$ of Ni = 0.35	Corrosion potential ( $E_{\text{corr}}$ ) of composite coating = -212.5, ( $E_{\text{corr}}$ of pure Ni = -281.6) in 0.5M Na <sub>2</sub> SO <sub>4</sub>	[8]
Ni-SiC	SiC: 50 nm	Microhardness (HV) of composite coating = 720, HV of pure Ni = 540	$E_{\text{corr}}$ of composite coating = ~0.35 V, $E_{\text{corr}}$ of pure Ni = 0.45 V in 0.5 M NaCl solution	[9]
Ni-Al <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>	Al <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub> : 0.6 $\mu\text{m}$	HV of composite coating ~ 525, HV of pure Ni ~375	-	[10]
Ni-carbon nano tube (CNT)	-	HV of composite coating = 600, HV of pure Ni = 300	-	[11]
Ni-CNT	-	-	$E_{\text{corr}}$ of composite coating = -0.55 V, $E_{\text{corr}}$ of Ni ~0.48 V in 3.5 wt.% NaCl	[12]
Ni-ZrO <sub>2</sub>	ZrO <sub>2</sub> : 10 $\mu\text{m}$	HV of composite coating ~ 1100, HV of pure Ni ~ 210.	$E_{\text{corr}}$ of composite coating = -0.34 V in 0.5 M K <sub>2</sub> SO <sub>4</sub>	[13]
Ni-Graphene (Gr)	-	HV of composite coating ~ 375, HV of Ni ~ 275	$E_{\text{corr}}$ of composite coating = -0.398 V, $E_{\text{corr}}$ of pure Ni = -0.492 V in 3.5 wt.% NaCl	[14]
Ni- Al <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub> , Ni-SiC and Ni-ZrO <sub>2</sub>	-	HV for composites: Ni-Al <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub> =380, Ni-	-	[15]

		SiC=500, ZrO <sub>2</sub> =400 and for pure Ni = 450		
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From Table 1, it can be seen that micro-nano particles improve both mechanical properties and enhance corrosion properties. Extensive work on nanocoating failure, prediction, and prognosis have been conducted at NanoCorr, Energy & Modelling Research Group, UK [16]. A comprehensive study of thin coating-substrate system deterioration enhanced by a combination of fracture and corrosion has been reported and modeled as Khan-Nazir I model [16,17]. This study provides an understanding of bi-material characteristics of coatings, mixed mode interfacial cracks, and combination of mechanics and diffusion concepts within the context of corrosive degradation. Wear-corrosion synergistic model Khan-Nazir II has been reported, which provides more accurate prediction compared to the conventional model, which were reported earlier [4]. Modeling of metal coating failure due to environmental factors has been published in [18]. Corrosion behavior of several Ni-based nanocomposite coating to include Ni-Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, Ni-SiC, Ni-ZrO<sub>2</sub>, and Ni-Graphene have been reported [19]. Recently, mathematical models have been developed for the prediction of uniform corrosion rate of structural steel subjected to acid rain, low pH conditions, the study investigated corrosion performance of steel in moist sulfur dioxide environment [20]. Lopez et al. [21] tested the electrodeposited Ni-Samarium (Sm) coating in NaCl environment as per ASTM B117 and ISO 10289 standards. Authors reported 6000 hours of salt spray exposure time without any corrosion in the presence of 34.6 mM of Sm<sup>3+</sup>.

However, these coatings have not been tested in moist air containing SO<sub>2</sub>, which is a major air pollutant and causes aggressive corrosion due to catalytic effect of iron oxide and hydroxide on

the formation of  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  from  $\text{SO}_2$ ,  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$ , and  $\text{O}_2$ . Limited accelerated corrosion studies have been conducted to assess nanocoating in moist  $\text{SO}_2$  environment. Therefore, it is important to study the corrosion behavior of Ni nanocomposite coatings in moist  $\text{SO}_2$  environment for real world applications such as automotive, architecture and marine applications where S-pollutants can cause corrosion due to formation of sulfuric/sulfurous acids either by acid rain or by reaction between moisture and dry deposition of Sulfur.

The present work is aimed to evaluate the corrosion behavior of electrodeposited Ni-nano composite coatings in moist  $\text{SO}_2$  environment. This paper presents a detailed experimental study of four various types of nanocomposite coatings: Ni, Ni/ $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$ , Ni/ $\text{ZrO}_2$ , and Ni/Graphene (Gr). ASTM Standard G87-02 Method B has been applied during the investigation of the nanocoatings mentioned above. Corrosion behavior of these coatings was also monitored by using Open Circuit Potential (OCP) in  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  environment. These coatings were analyzed by using surface characterization methods, including Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM), Energy-Dispersive X-ray Spectroscopy (EDS) and nano-hardness testing.

## 2. Experimental Procedure

### 2.1 Coating preparation:

Pure Ni, Ni-Gr, Ni- $\text{ZrO}_2$ , and Ni- $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  nanocomposite coatings ( $9 \pm 1 \mu\text{m}$  in thickness) were produced by pulse electrodeposition method. Prior to coating, steel substrates were conditioned with acetone by ultra-sonication for 5 min, followed by rinsing with deionized water. For electrodeposition, pulse current condition was controlled by using a Pulse Interface connected to pulse power supply. Pulse current conditions were kept as current density  $3 \text{ A/dm}^2$ , pulse on/off time (20–80 ms), and a duty cycle of 20%. An optimized Watt's bath chemical composition was

used for the deposition process as listed in Table 2[6]. For the development of nano-enhanced composite coating, Gr platelets (6-8 nm), ZrO<sub>2</sub> (30-40 nm), Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> (50-60 nm) nanoparticles were added into an electroplating bath that was under continuous magnetic stirring process. Moreover, to ensure better suspension of particles, the chemical solution was ultrasonically stirred during the deposition process. A nickel sheet of 99.9% purity was used as an anode, and a section of steel circular plate was coated while using it as a cathode. Standard surface conditioning was deployed before the coating development process. Flat plate samples with a surface area of 0.09 dm<sup>2</sup>, was mechanically polished to an average roughness of 0.05 µm and ultrasonically conditioned with ethanol followed by acetone and then coating was conducted. Surface morphology of electrodeposited samples was studied by using a SEM. Elemental analysis was conducted by using an EDS.

Table 2. Chemical and nanoparticle composition of bath for electrodeposition of Ni and Ni nanocomposite coatings.

Coating	Chemical composition (g/L)			
	Nickel sulfate	Nickel chloride	Boric acid	Nanoparticles
Ni	265	48	31	-
Ni-Al <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>	265	48	31	20
Ni-ZrO <sub>2</sub>	265	48	31	20
Ni-Gr	265	48	31	0.1

## 2.2 Nanoindentation and scratch test

To determine the hardness of Ni and Ni-nanocomposite thin coating, indentation hardness measurements were conducted. The tests were conducted using a diamond Berkovich tip in a nanoindentation system under depth-controlled setup with a maximum 1 µm displacement. The

choice of indentation depth was to utilize 10% of the thickness of the coating to avoid the coating to substrate transitioning hardness measurement. The indentations were made with a dwell period of 10s at maximum load.

Nano-scratch tests were performed on the coating by using spherical indenter with a gradual increase in load from 0 to 150 mN, and total distance was 1500  $\mu\text{m}$  as shown in Figure 1.

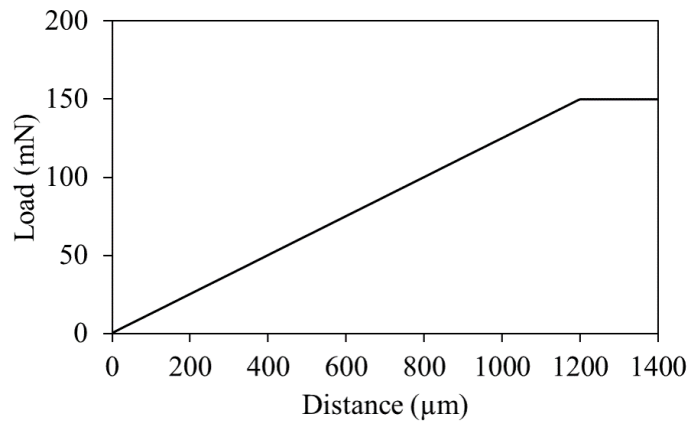


Figure 1. Loading profile during scratch tests on coatings using spherical indenter.

### 2.3 Corrosion tests

According to ASTM Standard G87-02 Method B alternating exposure[22], synthetic industrial atmosphere tests in moisture containing  $\text{SO}_2$  were conducted to quantify the protection provided by the coating. This test is more correctly a porosity test because it finds (and sometimes creates) holes through the coating to the substrate. Testing was conducted in an alternating atmosphere by using a dosing volume of 2000  $\text{cm}^3$  of  $\text{SO}_2$ . The test duration was two cycles, each cycle consisting of 8 hours of  $\text{SO}_2$  exposure at 40  $^{\circ}\text{C}$   $\pm$  3  $^{\circ}\text{C}$  followed by 16 hours under ambient conditions. Only the coated sections of the circular steel disc were exposed to a moist  $\text{SO}_2$  environment, and the rest of the steel surface was covered with wax, as shown in Figure 2.

Corrosion behavior of Ni nanocomposite coatings was quantitatively measured by open circuit potential (OCP) in 0.5 M  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  solution. The OCP was measured by using three electrode setup. A graphite electrode was employed as a counter electrode, and a saturated calomel reference electrode (SCE) was used as a reference electrode.



Figure 2. Ni and Ni-nanocomposite coated steel samples during moist  $\text{SO}_2$  exposure tests.

### 3. Results and discussion

#### 3.1 Nanoscale characterization

Hardness and elastic modulus measured by nanoindentation using a Berkovich indenter are plotted in Figure 3 and Figure 4, respectively. Due to the addition of the nanoparticles, the **mean** hardness and elastic modulus have increased significantly compared to pure Ni coating. Ni-Gr was observed to have 3.74 GPa mean hardness, which is the highest among all of the coatings and it is 19.9% higher than Ni coating. Similarly, mean elastic modulus was ~86% higher for Ni-Gr and Ni- $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  as compared to Ni coating.



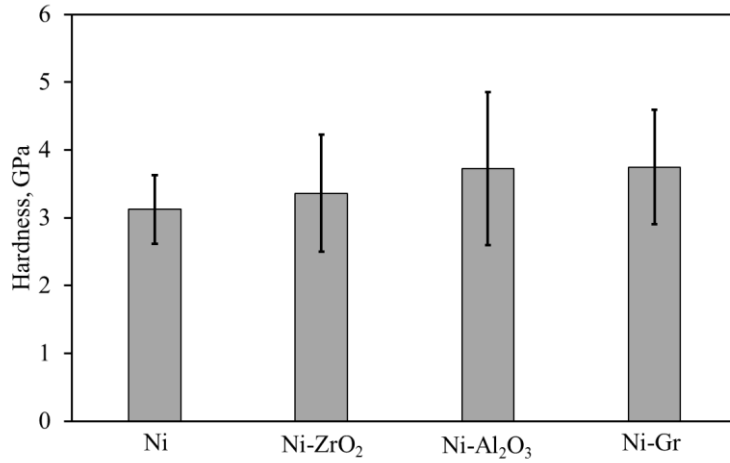


Figure 3. The hardness of the electrodeposited Ni and Ni-nano composite film by nanoindentation using Berkovich indenter.

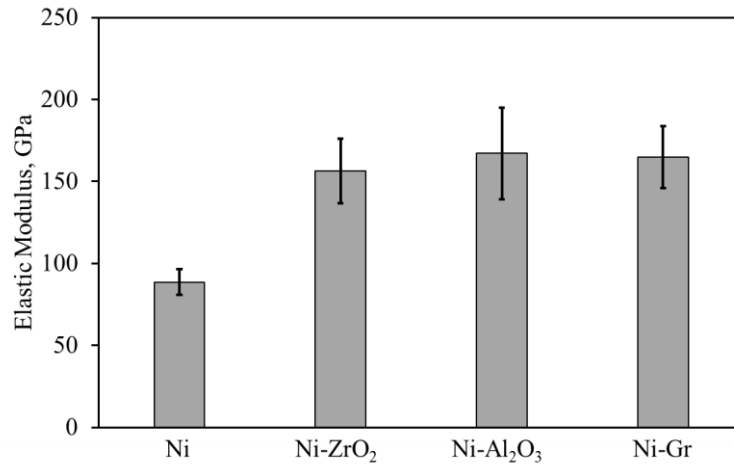


Figure 4. Elastic modulus of the electrodeposited Ni and Ni-nano composite film by nanoindentation using Berkovich indenter.

Scratch resistance of the coating was analyzed using a spherical indenter with a gradual increase in load up to 150 mN. All the four coatings showed a similar trend with ~ 2000 nm depth after 1500  $\mu$ m scratch as presented in Figure 5. However, after two cycles of corrosion tests in moist SO<sub>2</sub> environment, the maximum scratch depth increased by one order of magnitude compared to non-corroded samples. This increase in scratch depth is due to the formation of corrosion products on the surface of the coatings. The maximum scratch depth on the corroded samples is

shown in Figure 6. The maximum scratch depth of 32  $\mu\text{m}$  was observed for pure Ni coating. Whereas nanocomposite Ni coatings yielded a maximum scratch depth of 24-25  $\mu\text{m}$ .

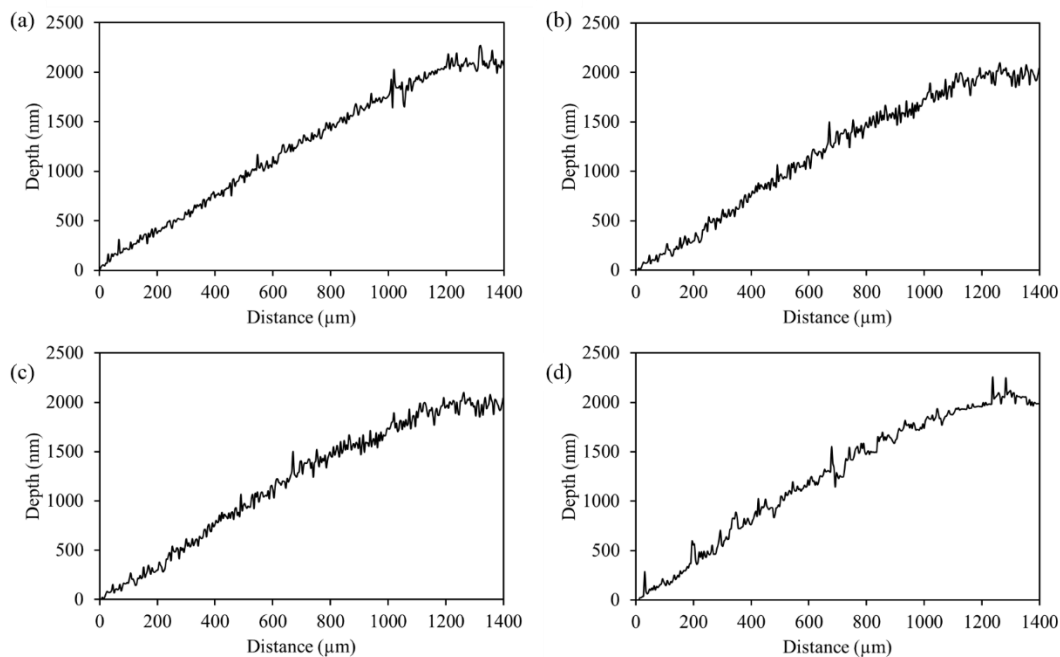


Figure 5. Scratch test profile on (a) Ni, (b) Ni-ZrO<sub>2</sub>, (c) Ni-Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> and (d) Ni-Gr using a spherical indenter with a gradual increase in load up to 150 mN

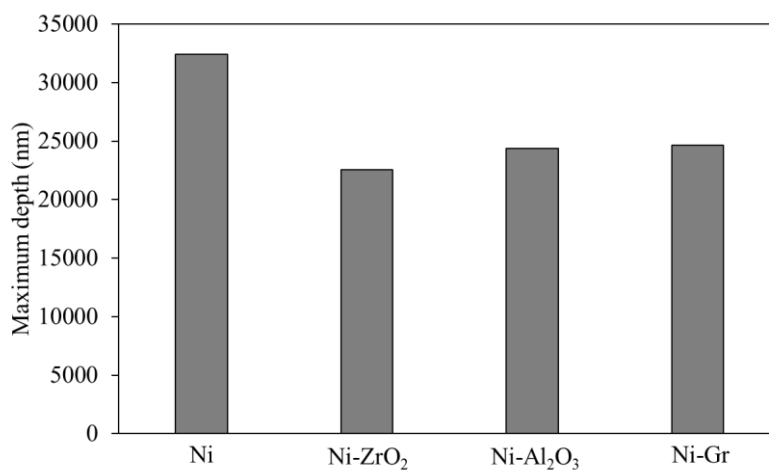


Figure 6. Maximum scratch depth on Ni-based coatings after two cycles of corrosion tests in moist SO<sub>2</sub> environment.

### 3.2 Surface corrosion

Figure 7 shows the corrosion status of bare steel, Ni, and Ni-nanocomposite coatings before and after two cycles of moist  $\text{SO}_2$  exposure. The images of pre and post corrosion surface clearly show that the highest surface corrosion on the bare steel surface (Figure 7(a)), where Ni-ZrO<sub>2</sub> and Ni-Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> were observed to have some brown spots that suggest ferrous corrosion. In the case of pure Ni and Ni-Gr coatings, no ferrous corrosion was observed. This behavior is also in good agreement with the accelerated corrosion on these coatings during salt spray testing of 450 h [19], where lowest surface corrosion was observed on Ni-Gr coating.

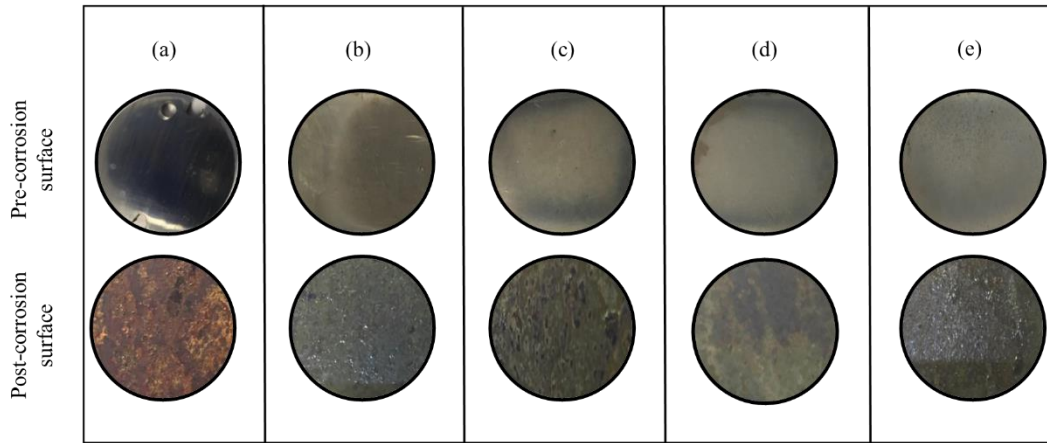


Figure 7. Pre and post corrosion status of (a) bare steel, (b) Ni, (c) Ni-ZrO<sub>2</sub>, (d) Ni-Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, and (e) Ni-Gr electrodeposited coatings.

Pre-corrosion SEM micrographs for all the coating surfaces are shown in Figure 8 along with their chemical compositions observed by EDS. The EDS spectrum confirms the presence of nanoparticles in the matrix. It also indicates that large particle size in Ni-Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> (Figure 8 (e)) and Ni-ZrO<sub>2</sub> (Figure 8 (c)) coatings accounted for the large porous structure that can make the surface prone to ferrous corrosion. However, the Ni-Gr coating has the smallest particle size and formed a very smooth coating, which has also been observed in the previous study [19].

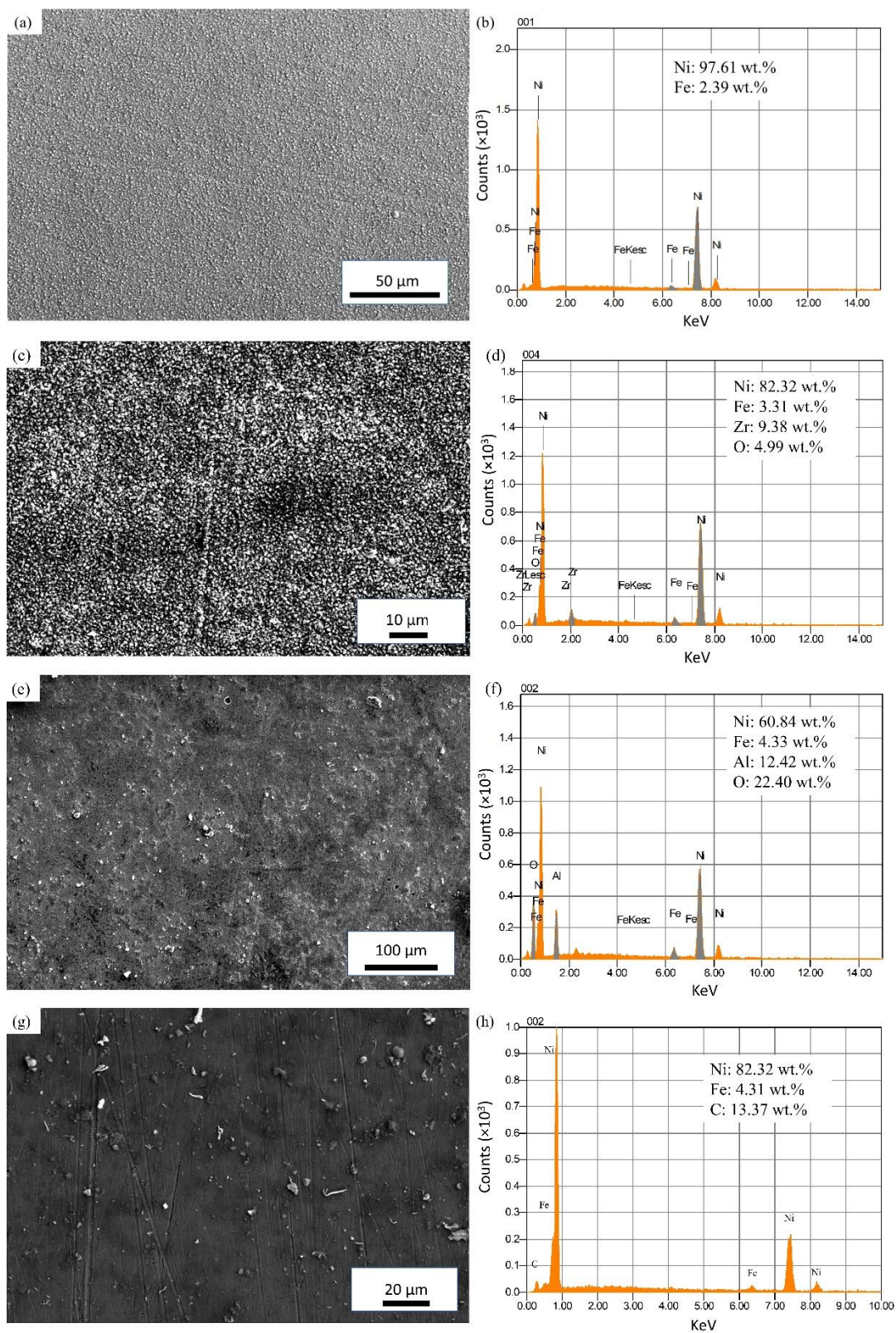


Figure 8. Pre-corrosion surface morphology of (a) Ni, (c) Ni-ZrO<sub>2</sub>, (e) Ni-Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> and (g) Ni-Gr with chemical composition observed by EDS.



Post-corrosion SEM micrographs for the coatings are shown in Figure 9. It can be observed that all the top surfaces of the coating start breaking into small fragments due to corrosion. Ni-ZrO<sub>2</sub> (Figure 9 (b)) and Ni-Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> (Figure 9 (c)) coatings were observed to have smaller fragments compared to Ni and Ni-Gr coating. Smaller fragments have larger surface fraction of boundaries that can cause subsurface corrosion. It can also be the reason for observed ferrous corrosion in Ni-Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> and Ni-ZrO<sub>2</sub>.

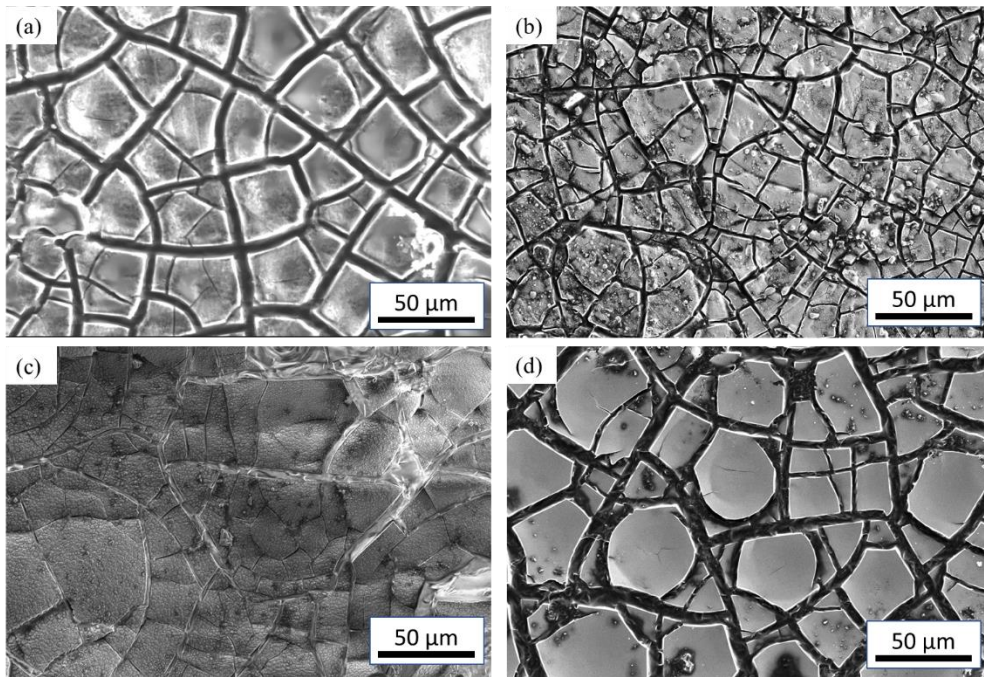


Figure 9. Post-corrosion surface morphology of (a) Ni, (b) Ni-ZrO<sub>2</sub>, (c) Ni-Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> and (d) Ni-Gr.

### 3.3 Open circuit potential

The OCP was measured in 0.5 M H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>, as shown in Figure 10. The OCP of pure Ni coating was found to be stable around -1.72 V. Whereas the OCP for Ni-ZrO<sub>2</sub> coating was -1.14 V, a little higher than the pure Ni coating. The OCP for Ni-Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> and Ni-Gr coating was further increased and found to be around -0.42 V. Increase in OCP value suggests that the corrosion

resistance of Ni nanocomposite coatings are higher than Ni coating. Similar behavior has been observed for Ni-CeO<sub>2</sub> nanocomposite coating due to the addition of nanoparticles [23].

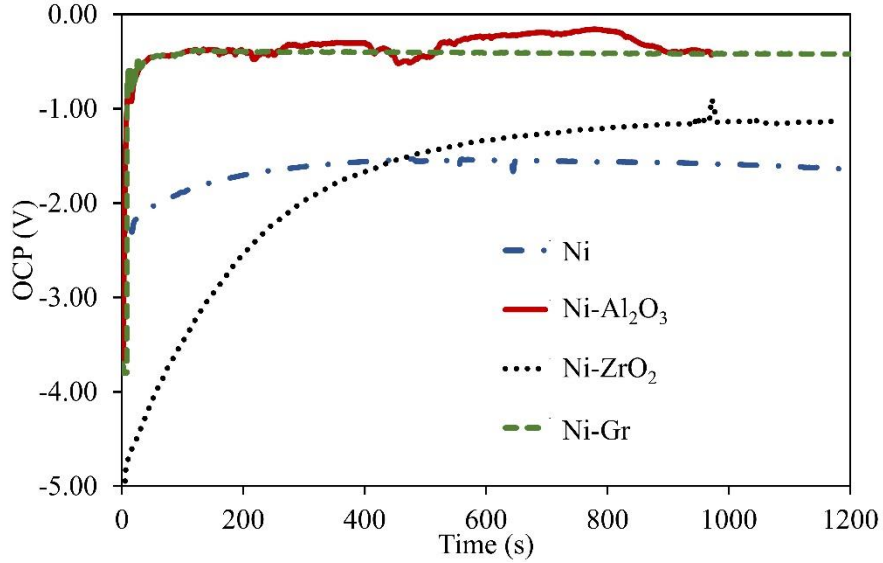


Figure 10. Open circuit potential of Ni coatings measured in 0.5M H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>

#### 4. Cost estimation of nanocomposite coatings for large scale production

Electrodeposited Ni coatings are commercially available for different sizes of parts [24]. For nanocomposite Ni coatings the additional requirement is nano particles of required materials. These can contain nano particles in the range of 10 – 30 vol.% [25-27]. The required amount of nanoparticles for 10 µm thick coating over 1×1 m<sup>2</sup> with 10-30 vol.% of nanoparticles is calculated in Table 3. The calculated cost for the required amount of materials to coat an area of 1 m<sup>2</sup> is approximately 1.5 to 3 USD. This slight increase in cost can be easily accommodated to provide significant improvement in the mechanical and corrosion performances.

Table 3. Amount and cost of nanoparticles for 10 µm thick coating over 1×1 m<sup>2</sup>.

Material	Density (g/cm <sup>3</sup> )	Cost (USD/kg)	Amount of material required (g)	Cost for required weight (USD)

Al <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>	3.95	150 [28]	3.95-11.85	1.77
ZrO <sub>2</sub>	5.68	200 [28]	5.68-17.04	3.04
Gr	2.26	220 [29]	2.26-6.80	1.49

## Conclusions

Nickel nanocomposite coatings were prepared by electrodeposition and their mechanical and corrosion performance were evaluated. Mechanical properties evaluated by nanoindentation on the nanocomposite coatings showed that Ni-Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, Ni-ZrO<sub>2</sub>, Ni-Gr have higher mean hardness and elastic modulus than the pure Ni coating. The improved mechanical properties of the nanocomposite coatings can enhance the durability and applicability of the coating. Prior to corrosion testing, all coatings showed the same scratch depth of 2  $\mu$ m at the end of the scratch. After the two cycles of moist SO<sub>2</sub> corrosion test, the nanocomposite coatings have a lower scratch depth compared to pure Ni coating. The lower scratch depth suggests that the nanocomposite coatings have higher wear resistance compared to pure Ni coating. After two cycles of moist SO<sub>2</sub> exposure, lower surface corrosion was observed for Ni-Gr followed by Ni-ZrO<sub>2</sub>, Ni-Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, and pure Ni. The OCP of Ni-Gr, Ni-Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> is more positive than that of pure Ni, it suggests improved corrosion resistance.

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