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# Syntrophic Microorganisms Interactions in Anaerobic Digestion (Ad): a Critical Review in the Light of Increase Energy Production

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Despite the worldwide growth of Anaerobic Digestion (AD) plants able to produce biogas, further investigations on the cooperation of syntrophic organisms within mixed cultures are necessary. Microbiomes in AD bioreactors depend on process conditions, heterogeneities and on the intrinsic characteristics of microorganisms. However, *chemotropic* organisms obtain energy by extracting an electron flow from different organic compounds that are successively passed through different Red-Ox cycles, supported by enzymes under different red-ox potentials ( $E^\circ$ ). Oxidation-reduction cycles are present not only at intracellular level, but also as interspecies (exocellular) electron exchange, mediated through chemical compounds (Shuttled Interspecies Electron Transfer, SIET) or based on electrical interactions between bacteria (Direct Interspecies Electron Transfer, DIET). Metal particles, namely Fe, via anaerobic corrosion (AC) generates  $Fe^{2+}$  and  $e^-$  that interact with the biological system suggesting that a higher energy recovery is achievable, due to modification of syntrophic relationships and to positive bio-stimulatory effects. This review addresses the state-of-the-art of exocellular syntrophy among microorganisms SIET and DIET, introduces the AC of  $Fe^0$  under the operative conditions, summarizes the different laboratory-scale studies that have been performed with metals particles and hypothesizes energy improvement mechanisms in the light of enhancement of AD performances.

## 1. Introduction

Energy conservation within the AD process is a complex phenomenon strongly dependent on *mutualism* among mixed consortia of microorganisms. The widespread use of this technique in different areas and the versatility that it offers for energy-recovering under bio- $H_2$  and bio- $CH_4$  using different substrates is very ample. From the energy sustainability point of view, AD is an advantageous process because it provides a relative inexpensive technique to valorize the energy contained in organic wastes (OW) and transform it into biogas, a gas mixture containing mainly  $CH_4$  and  $CO_2$ . Desired biogas composition is around 70 % v/v in methane, but real yields are in the range of 40-60 % v/v with an important unavoidable fraction of carbon dioxide (> 30%). Biogas, in fact, is curious because it is constituted essentially of two gases where C atoms exhibits the maximum difference in their oxidation state: -4 in  $CH_4$  totally reduced, whereas +4 in the  $CO_2$  the most oxidized state. Microorganisms can be widely classified according to their metabolic requirements. *Heterotrophs* use always organic carbon coupled either to organic (*chemoorganotrophs*) or inorganic compounds (*chemolithotrophs*), or when sunlight is used as energy source, they are classified as *photoheterotroph*. Differently, *autotrophs* can grow on  $CO_2$  as carbon source, using the energy contained in sunlight (*photoautotroph*) or different compounds (*chemoautotroph*). Within the microbial consortia of AD, microorganisms of interest belong to *Archaea* and *Bacteria* domains, hence prokaryotes, *chemotropic* either *chemoorganotrophs* or *chemoautotroph*. For chemotrophs, the degradation of substrates inside a bacterial cell produces energy and electrons that are released mainly from the broken of C-C and C-H bonds of substrates. The others vital functions of the cell, that require energy, are known as anabolism. For the good functioning of the cell, catabolic reactions are coupled to anabolic processes and the energy flux from the first is fed into growth and maintenance mechanisms. The extracted chemical energy, in the form of an electron flow is mediated at intracellular level by different intracellular redox mediators (i.e. ferredoxins, flavodoxins,

rubredoxins, NAD, FAD) that are continuously reduced and oxidized, at different redox potential, depending on the metabolism conditions of each specie (Thauer *et al.*, 2008), by different enzymatic groups.

Biogas production through AD is a task carried out by different groups of microorganisms, whose actions are concatenated: first comes the *hydrolysis* of large molecules (i.e. polysaccharides, lipids, proteins and nucleic acids) into monomers and the successive primary fermentation (*acidogenesis*) that converts these substances to short-chain organic acids or volatile fatty acids (VFA) as butyric, propionic, n-butyric, lactic, acetic and formic acids and gases as H<sub>2</sub> and CO<sub>2</sub> to provide the necessary metabolites for the last two steps of the AD process: *acetogenesis* and *methanogenesis*. The acetogenic phase is responsible for the further oxidation of VFA into acetate, releasing an electron flow, which is ultimately used for the methane production. Mixed cultures used in AD exhibit a great level of complexity and organization, where each group of microorganisms (i.e. *hydrolytic, acidogenic, acetogenic and methanogenic*) has a defined function during the fermentation, which cannot be replaced by other group, hence it is important to maintain significant levels of each. In fact, the process conditions of a bioreactor are carefully chosen taking into consideration the microorganisms growth requirements so that they can exercise their role within the complex biological system. Among all the phases present, the *methanogenesis* requires slightly different optimal conditions compared to the other phases. Such conditions are, for example, a narrower pH range, strictly anaerobic conditions with redox < -330 mV, salinity, the need of micronutrients (Ni, Co, Mo, Se) and the presence of the intermediate compounds necessary for the metabolic pathways of *hydrogenotrophic* and *acetoclastic methanogenesis*. Each methanogenic pathway, presented in Table 1 (i.e. reactions 7 and 8) requires different substrates, which are mainly produced during *acetogenesis*; hydrogenotrophic pathway fixes CO<sub>2</sub> and H<sub>2</sub> into CH<sub>4</sub>, while the acetoclastic one cleaves acetate molecules into CH<sub>4</sub> and CO<sub>2</sub> (Gottardo *et al.*, 2015).

## 2. Overall Energy Balance in AD processes

The transfer of chemical energy within biological systems is carried out through redox reactions, where (mainly) carbon molecules do not remain in the same oxidation state. Electrons are extracted from the oxidized compound and are accepted by a reductive agent. Typically, oxidation and reduction reactions in these types of systems exchanged not only e<sup>-</sup> but whole atoms of H<sub>2</sub>.

Table 1: Key fermentation and methanogenic reactions in AD

Name	Reaction	<sup>a)</sup> ΔG <sup>o</sup> , (kJ/mol)	Pairs of Electrons
1. Methane Combustion	CH <sub>4</sub> + 2O <sub>2</sub> → CO <sub>2</sub> + 2H <sub>2</sub> O	-827	4
2. Ethanol oxidation	CH <sub>3</sub> CH <sub>2</sub> OH + H <sub>2</sub> O → CH <sub>3</sub> COOH + 2H <sub>2</sub>	+10	2
3. Propionate oxidation	CH <sub>3</sub> CH <sub>2</sub> COOH + 2H <sub>2</sub> O → CH <sub>3</sub> COOH + CO <sub>2</sub> + 3H <sub>2</sub>	+72	3
4. Butyrate oxidation	CH <sub>3</sub> CH <sub>2</sub> CH <sub>2</sub> COOH + 2H <sub>2</sub> O → 2CH <sub>3</sub> COOH + 2H <sub>2</sub>	+48	2
5. Acetate oxidation	CH <sub>3</sub> COOH + 2H <sub>2</sub> O → 2CO <sub>2</sub> + 4H <sub>2</sub>	+95	4
6. Homoacetogenesis	2CO <sub>2</sub> + 4H <sub>2</sub> → CH <sub>3</sub> COOH + 2H <sub>2</sub> O	-95	4
7. Hydrogenotrophic pathway	4H <sub>2</sub> + CO <sub>2</sub> → CH <sub>4</sub> + 2H <sub>2</sub> O	-131	4
8. Acetoclastic pathway	CH <sub>3</sub> COOH → CH <sub>4</sub> + CO <sub>2</sub>	-36	2
9. Fe <sup>o</sup> oxidation and CO <sub>2</sub> reduction	4Fe <sup>o</sup> + 8H <sup>+</sup> + CO <sub>2</sub> → CH <sub>4</sub> + 4Fe <sup>2+</sup> + 2H <sub>2</sub> O		4

<sup>a)</sup>Data calculated from (Thauer, Jungermann and Decker, 1977)

A general approach used in biochemistry to study the direction and feasibility of metabolic pathways is the evaluation of the standard change of Gibbs free energy (ΔG<sup>o</sup>) of a given reaction at standard physiological conditions (ΔG<sup>o</sup>). Values of ΔG<sup>o</sup>, hence, represent the driving force of the process and can be expressed by means of the Nerst Equation (ΔG<sup>o</sup> = -nFΔE<sup>o</sup>) in terms of electrochemical potential (ΔE<sup>o</sup>). This difference in energy content between reactants and products, expressed as ΔE<sup>o</sup> or ΔG<sup>o</sup>, provides valuable information about the studied system: *i)* indicates in which direction the reaction will proceed (i.e. *exergonic* or *endergonic*) and *ii)* allows knowing the energy level of the final product. Besides, considering the thermodynamic relation ΔG = ΔH - TΔS, the efficiency and performance of the AD systems is commonly assessed by evaluating the Δ<sub>f</sub>H or Low Heating Value (LHV<sub>biogas</sub>) of the resulting gas, compared to the initial energy content of the substrate LHV<sub>substrate</sub> (Malavè *et al.*, 2017).

## 3. Syntrophic relations

Within AD systems, between the *acetogenic* and the *methanogenic* phase, there have been identified syntrophic relationships where both groups of microorganisms strongly depend on each other. Bryant *et al.*, (1967) first evinced these type of relation, proposing the "Interspecies Electron Transfer" theory. The observation of a *Methanobacillus omelianskii* culture, an anaerobic methanogenic culture that was thought to

be pure, lead to the conclusion that there were two strains involved for CH<sub>4</sub> production that established a syntrophic relation. That is, the first strain “*S organism*” was able to oxidize ethanol, producing H<sub>2</sub> used by the second hydrogen-consuming bacterium, strain *Methanobacterium bryantii* M.o.H, to produce CH<sub>4</sub>. During the separated culture of the two species, H<sub>2</sub> production was lower and CH<sub>4</sub> generation non-existent. These results first suggested that the syntrophic relation among these microorganisms was based on electron transfer: fermentative bacteria used as final electron carrier H<sup>+</sup>, producing H<sub>2</sub> that was captured by methanogens to form CH<sub>4</sub> (reactions 2 and 7 from Table 1). The syntrophic relation, in that system, was not only limited to the electron transfer but also to the maintenance of a low hydrogen partial pressure ( $P_{H_2}$ ) that is necessary to favor thermodynamically the further production of hydrogen from fermentative bacteria.

It should be noted from Table 1, that the acetogenic phase (i.e. the oxidation of VFA and alcohols into acetate) takes place under endergonic conditions, at the expense of the next step, methanogenesis. This means that the syntrophic relation between acetogenic bacteria and methanogenic archaea is based on the overall free energy balance and in the trade of electrons and metabolites that these two groups exchange. The term of syntrophy, in AD context, is used then to describe the thermodynamically interdependent lifestyle where the degradation of a compound is couple to a successive reaction that takes place in other microorganism, and where specific conditions, such as metabolites concentrations (i.e. mainly H<sub>2</sub>, formate and acetate) are maintained at specific values (McInerney, Sieber and Gunsalus, 2010). The syntrophic oxidation of different compounds has been widely revised in literature using substrates such as butyrate, propionate (Schmidt and Ahring, 1995), branched-chain fatty acids (Stams *et al.*, 2012), among others.

#### 4. Interspecies Electron Transfer (IET)

IET can be seen as the most important phenomenon contributing to syntrophic relations in AD. Different studies (Stams *et al.*, 2006) summarize the different types of interspecies electron transfer in methanogenic environments. The exocellular interspecies electron transfer, in general, can be classified into two types:

- a) Shuttled Interspecies Electron Transfer (SIET): an exchange mechanism mediated through chemical shuttle molecules (*electron carriers*), mainly referred to H<sub>2</sub> and formate,
- b) Direct Interspecies electron transfer (DIET): a mechanism that does not involve chemical shuttles (shuttle-free), but rather relies on cytochromes, electrical conductive pili or aggregates formation to take place;

Evidence suggest that SIET is not only limited to H<sub>2</sub> and formate, but also a wide variety of compounds can serve as electron shuttles (e.g. sulphur compounds, humic acid complexes, flavins, cysteine, among others) for different types of microorganisms. Morris *et al.* (2013) further classified shuttle compounds as soluble or insoluble depending of their nature. Each microbial consortium presents different conditions for SIET, but general observations of AD sludges suggest that the main shuttles compounds are H<sub>2</sub> and formate. As noted before, fermentative bacteria release an electron flow derived from the degradation of substrates that reduce H<sup>+</sup> to H<sub>2</sub> or CO<sub>2</sub> to formate (HCOO<sup>-</sup>). One important consideration must be done concerning the diffusion of these carries in the system. The formation of granules or aggregates within the anaerobic system has a strong effect on IET, for both types of transfer (SIET and DIET). Evidently, the diffusion of the carries compounds and the distance between syntrophic partners considerably influence which type of transport might occur. Schmidt and Ahring (1995) suggested that average distance between cells in intact granules is 2 to 3 μm and it was also noted that after disintegration the distance can reach up to 10 μm. An early study conducted by Boone, Johnson and Liu (1989) examined the diffusion of both carriers, H<sub>2</sub> and formate, for a *Syntrophomonas wolfei* and *Methanobacterium formicicum* in anoxic conditions and interspecies diffusion of H<sub>2</sub> and formate were estimated, demonstrating that IET not kinetically limited by enzymatic formation or consumption of these species but rather thermodynamically influenced by the involved species. Felchner-Zwirello, Winter and Gallert (2013) used a propionic acid enriched culture to study the interactions between aggregation and IET H<sub>2</sub> transfer. For this system, formate contribution to CH<sub>4</sub> generation was low and H<sub>2</sub>-SIET accounted for most of the production. It was determined that over time, granules reached a maximum size (54 μm), where distance between electron acceptors and donors could be as short as 0.29 μm and neither diffusion constituted a limiting step. On the other hand, DIET relies on the physical interaction of the involved species. The general idea of direct electron transfer follows the same principle: one microorganism serves as an electron donor and/or other as electron acceptor, mediated by different structures such as electrochemical active enzymes, redox mediators, cytochromes, pili-like filaments and/or the formation of mixed aggregates of the involved species. Most of the research related to DIET has been focused on the bacterial *Geobacter* and *Shewanella* spp. According to Thauer *et al.* (2008), the presence of cytochromes in methanogens is almost limited to the *Methanosarcinales* (i.e. *Methanosarcina*, *Methanosaeta* and *Methanolobus*) and the reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> with H<sub>2</sub> (i.e. *hydrogenotrophic* pathway), proceeds differently for each case. Different evidence suggest that *Geobacter Sulfurreducens*' ability for extracellular electron transfer requires not only pili-like structures,

but also different types of cytochromes, that are required for electrical interactions with other species and for  $\text{Fe}^{3+}$  reduction (Shrestha and Rotaru, 2014). Moreover, expression of different types of cytochromes has been observed depending on whether *Geobacter Sulfurreducens* serves as cathode or anode during the electron exchange. Rotaru *et al.* (2012) studied a co-culture of *Pelobacter carbinolicus* and *Geobacter sulfurreducens* using three different modified strains for the experiments; their results showed that the primary carrier is  $\text{H}_2$ , and the observations suggested that SIET requires less coordination with syntrophic partners than DIET, probably because of the faster metabolizing via SIET and the less energetic investment for producing proteins necessary to generate the electrical connections/structures required for DIET.

## 5. $\text{Fe}^\circ$ supplementation to AD

IET interactions, in its broadest sense, can serve to understand the interaction of different metal particles or metal oxides with the biological system, particularly serving as electron sink for heterotrophic metabolisms or as electron supply for autotrophic pathways. Nowadays, different studies suggest that the supplementation of different metals might provide positive results enhancing the AD process, particularly due to the *Exogenous Electron Transfer* between the biological phase and inorganic compounds. Several metals and oxide have been tested (Co, Ni,  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$ ) and among them, the most tested material so far is  $\text{Fe}^\circ$ , nano-scale or micro-sized iron. The corrosion of  $\text{Fe}^\circ$  has been studied independently, in particular to understand the behavior under different conditions (e.g. aerobic, anaerobic, sediments, etc.) and verify the average lifetime (Reardon, 1995). A first approximation of  $\text{Fe}^\circ$  anaerobic corrosion (AC) is the study of the system  $\text{Fe}-\text{H}_2\text{O}$  under the AD conditions, evaluating the thermodynamic stable form of Fe, represented commonly in  $E_{\text{H}}$  vs. pH plots (Pourbaix Diagrams). Nevertheless, fermentation broths also comprise the biological phase as well as other organic and inorganic species, which can influence the speciation of the corrosion products. Considering the semi-reaction of zero valent iron (ZVI) corrosion at standard conditions (25 °C, pH = 7,  $a_{\text{Fe}^{2+}}=1$ ), which is  $\text{Fe}^\circ \rightarrow \text{Fe}^{2+} + e^-$ , it presents a standard potential of  $E^\circ(\text{V}) = -0,440$ , which is similar to key biological reactions taking place in AD. Currently, obtained results exhibit not unified trend, as it can be seen on Table 2, sometimes different outputs appear contradictory and no study provides a holistic explanation capable of correlating experimental results with theoretical predictions. Different studies have tested metals particles (Table 2) ranging from a few nanometers up to the range of millimeters, and consequently exposed to diverse specific surfaces. However, higher reactivity based on the structure and size has not been directly related to cytotoxicity for all micro and nanoparticles (Karlsson *et al.*, 2009). To the best of the author's knowledge, cytotoxicity of nano- and micro-sized particles for the methane-producing microbial communities has not been fully assessed yet.

## 6. Conclusions

AD is seen today as successful technology for bioenergy production through OW energy valorization therefore the techniques directed towards the improvement of its performance must be kept economically and environmentally sustainable; probably due to this fact, some of the revised studies used waste metal oxides, iron powders, magnetite, waste scrap iron and even rusty iron scraps. However, the reviewed studies suggest that electrochemical activity of AD consortia is a global microbial phenomenon widely expressed in different AD systems, probably also in nature overall. The present review presents the results and the state-of-the-art concerning the empirical observations, but the direct explanation of enhancement mechanism for methane production, increased performance and the  $\text{CH}_4$  enrichment in the resulting biogas has not been fully clarified. Furthermore, the performance improvement for the studied systems might have multi-causal motivations, which responds to the action of the metal particles in the different stages of AD; the corollary of metal supplementation can be divided into four large blocks: i) enzymatic enhancement promoted by metals availability in the culture media, ii) effect on  $\text{H}_2$  threshold and population dynamics, iii) boost of electroactivity due to higher SIET, DIET and EET and iv) improvement of operating parameters. All these factors seem to contribute to natural AD redox cycles interactions with redox cycles of metals particles with an overall energy production that is evidenced through the increase in biogas production and the higher percentage of methane in it. Therefore, syntrophy inside AD is a key phenomenon to understand by deeper analysis of electrochemical interactions among microorganisms and metals particles. More research is needed to assess effects of metals supplementations on biological systems, mechanisms for microbiological iron use and uptake, the speciation products of corrosion, the stability of micro- or nano- particles, optimal dosages and the scale-up feasibility of this technique to different levels from bioreactor to natural environments. Natural carbon cycles include the photosynthetic reduction of  $\text{CO}_2$  into organic forms, using solar energy, to be subsequently re-oxidized by chemotrophs (or industrial activities), extracting the energy embedded in carbon molecules.

Table 2: Related studies to metals supplementation to AD

Reference	Vs <sub>1</sub> (g/L)	Substrate	Size	Added Compound	Doses (g/L)	Relevant results
(Yang, Guo and Hu, 2013)	-	Glucose (Prepared medium)	55 nm	Fe <sup>0</sup>	0 0.06 0.56 1.68	- Inhibition from 1 mM NZVI (0.056 g/L)
			212 μm	Fe <sup>0</sup>	1.68	- ZVI increase methane production (around 10 %)
(Feng et al., 2014)	6.54	Waste activated sludge	0.2 mm	Fe <sup>0</sup>	0 1 4 20	- Production of VFAs was enhanced by 37.3% (at 4 g/L) - V <sub>CH<sub>4</sub></sub> increased 43.5% (at 20 g/L) - % CH <sub>4</sub> went from 58.5 % to 68.9 % (at 20 g/L)
(Cruz Viggli et al., 2014)	0.2	Prepared Medium	100-150 nm	Fe <sub>3</sub> O <sub>4</sub> (Magnetite)	0 0.35	- CH <sub>4</sub> production rate increased by 30 % - Electron Transfer calculations suggest CIET
(Zhang et al., 2014)	56.7	Dewatered sewage sludge	0.2 mm	Fe <sup>0</sup> powder	0 1 6 8 10 14 20	- Fe rusty scrap had better performance - Hypothesized Fe <sup>3+</sup> microbial reduction
			~ 8mm	Clean scrap Fe	0 1 6 8 10 14 20	- C-1 <sub>4</sub> production increased 13 % (Fe <sup>0</sup> powder at 10 g/L), 23 % for the clean scrap and almost 30 % for the rusty scrap
			~ 8 mm	Rusty scrap Fe	10	
(Zhen et al., 2015)	21.9	Waste activated sludge	2 mm	Fe <sup>0</sup>	0 1.1 2.2 5.5 1' 22	- CH <sub>4</sub> production increased 39.3 % (at 22 g/L) - Fe <sup>0</sup> effects are higher at mesophilic conditions (35 °C) - % CH <sub>4</sub> went from 60.9 % to 68.9 %
(Hu et al., 2015)	18.4	Waste activated sludge	50 nm	Fe <sup>0</sup>	0 17 3.3 10 16.7	- CH <sub>4</sub> yield enhanced by 60.5 %
			10 mm	Waste Fe scraps	0 33.3 66.7 100	- Fe <sup>0</sup> addition favoured PO <sub>4</sub> <sup>3-</sup> removal - % CH <sub>4</sub> increased 37.4% (at 3.3 g/L)
(Suanon et al., 2016)	47.6	Dewatered sewage sludge	50 nm	Fe <sup>0</sup>	0 5 10	- CH <sub>4</sub> content increased up to 15 % (at 10 g/L magnetite)
			20 nm	Fe <sub>3</sub> O <sub>4</sub> (Magnetite)	5 10	- Decreased gas yield at 10 g/L for Fe <sup>0</sup> and Fe <sub>3</sub> O <sub>4</sub>
			28 nm	Co	0.00'	- Ni was the most effective nanoparticles
(Abdelisalam et al., 2016)	58.5	Cattle dung slurry	17 nm	Ni	0.002	- For each case, CH <sub>4</sub> production was increased more than 60 %
			9 nm	Fe	0.02	
			7 nm	Fe <sub>3</sub> O <sub>4</sub>	0.02	- Bio-stimulatory effects of nanoparticles (Co, Ni, Fe, Fe <sub>3</sub> O <sub>4</sub> )

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