

**Estimating the mean acetification rate via on-line monitored changes in ethanol during a semi-continuous vinegar production cycle**

García-García, I.<sup>1\*</sup> Cantero-Moreno, D.,<sup>2</sup> Jiménez-Ot, C.<sup>1</sup> Baena-Ruano, S.,<sup>1</sup> Jiménez-Hornero, J.,<sup>1</sup> Santos-Dueñas, I.<sup>1</sup> , Bonilla-Venceslada, J.<sup>1</sup> and Barja, F<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Department of Chemical Engineering, Faculty of Sciences, University of Córdoba, Campus Universitario de Rabanales, Ctra. Nnal. IV, km 396, 14071 Córdoba, Spain

<sup>2</sup> Department of Chemical Engineering, Faculty of Sciences, University of Cádiz, Campus Río de San Pedro, 11510 Puerto Real, Cádiz, Spain

<sup>3</sup> Laboratory of Bioenergetics and Microbiology, University of Geneva, 10, ch. des Embouchis, 1254 Jussy-Geneva, Switzerland

**ABSTRACT**

A simple, fast method for estimating the mean rate of biological oxidation in a typical semi-continuous wine vinegar production cycle was developed. The method involves on-line monitoring changes in ethanol concentration during the cycle and allows the acetification rate in each cycle step to be estimated. This datum is of a high interest with a view to optimizing the process by establishing the influence of the operational variables on productivity.

**Key words:** Vinegar, wine, acetification rate.

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\* Corresponding author. Tel. +34 957 218589. Fax +34 957 218625. E-mail isidoro.garcia@uco.es

## INTRODUCTION

Wine vinegar is industrially produced largely by using a semi-continuous process where a fraction of the total volume of a submerged culture is withdrawn on a periodic basis (Arnold, 2002; Ebner, 1983; Levonen *et al.*, 1983; Llaguno, 1991; Suárez Lepe, 1992; Tesfaye, 2002). The remaining volume, which acts as an inoculum for the next cycle, is replenished with fresh wine that is added in small portions to obtain the final working volume. This procedure results in temporal changes in the properties of the culture medium where acetic bacteria grow.

Industrial acetification processes are usually conducted in reactors of the self-aspirating turbine type. The high efficiency with which oxygen is transferred from the air to the culture medium results in a low energy consumption per litre of converted ethanol (Ebner, 1995).

The acetification process can be performed in various ways. Thus, depending on the time the reactor is unloaded, the unloaded volume and the way the reactor is loaded, among other factors, the culture medium can undergo more or less abrupt changes that may alter the concentration and activity of the bacterial population it contains. Optimizing the process entails examining the influence of diverse factors on the reactor performance. This involves much experimental work (Garrido-Vidal, 2003) owing to the large number of variables potentially affecting the process and the typical difficulty encountered in experiments with microbial reactions.

Specifically, one must accurately determine the overall acetification rate in each semi-continuous work cycle in order to compare it with values obtained under different experimental conditions. The overall acetification rate is usually determined from the final acidity of the culture medium immediately prior to unloading the reactor, the unloaded volume and the total duration of the fermentation cycle. However, the rate can –and should– also be determined from the variation of the ethanol concentration during a cycle. A number of devices for continuously monitoring the ethanol concentration in the culture medium (*e.g.* Alkosens and Frings probes) are currently available.

Effectively optimizing vinegar production entails determining the acetification rate in both ways. Its determination from the ethanol concentration allows one to establish the variation of the biological oxidation rate throughout the cycle, which is especially interesting with a view to assessing the influence of operational variables on the different steps of the process and alter them as required to improve the outcome. On the other hand, determining the acetification rate from final acidity data provides an additional measure of the amount of substrate evaporated through aeration in each cycle.

In this work, we developed a simple, fast method for estimating the acetification rate from the variation of the ethanol concentration over a typical wine acetification cycle.

## **MATERIAL AND METHODS**

### **Microorganisms**

The inoculum used consisted of a mixed culture of *Acetobacter* and *Gluconobacter* bacteria that were obtained from a fully operational industrial fermentation tank. The total cell concentration during a cycle ranged from  $3 \times 10^8$  to  $4 \times 10^8$  cell mL<sup>-1</sup>.

### **Substrate**

The substrate employed was white wine from the Montilla-Moriles region (protected designation of origin in southern Spain) with an ethanol content of  $12 \text{ }^\circ\text{GL} \pm 0.5$  ( $^\circ\text{GL} = \text{ml ethanol}/100 \text{ ml of medium}$ ) and an initial acidity of  $0.2 \text{ }^\circ\text{Acetic acid}$  ( $^\circ\text{Acetic acid} = \text{g acetic acid}/100 \text{ ml of medium}$ ).

### **Fermentation conditions**

Experiments were conducted in a Frings 8 L fermentation tank, following a procedure mimicking those employed at many industrial plants and involving the following:

- (1) Setting a constant temperature of 31 °C and allowing the reaction to proceed to an ethanol concentration of *ca.* 1.5 °GL and then rapidly unloading 50% of the tank contents.
- (2) Slowly refilling the tank to the final working volume without exceeding a preset ethanol concentration (*e.g.* 5 °GL) at any time. This entails initially loading the tank in a continuous manner to the desired ethanol concentration and then, in a semi-continuous manner, to the final working volume (8 L in our case) without exceeding the aforesaid ethanol concentration.
- (3) Passing air at a flow-rate of 7.5 L per litre of medium per hour.

The bioreactor was operated in an automated manner and was loaded, unloaded, controlled and monitored without operator intervention via previously programmed computer software.

This operational procedure resulted in temporal changes in some operational variables including volume, ethanol concentration, acidity and cell concentration.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1 shows the results obtained in a typical acetification cycle performed as described in the previous section. The graph shows three distinct regions, namely:

- (a) One spanning the period where the reactor was continuously loaded to a 5 °GL ethanol concentration.
- (b) A second one where the ethanol concentration remained constant by effect of the semi-continuous addition of wine to replenish the ethanol previously used by the bacteria.
- (c) A final region where, once the maximum preset culture volume was reached, the concentration of ethanol decreased in a sustained manner until the reactor was unloaded.

Figure 2 shows the variation of the ethanol concentration and volume of the medium in the first region. The bold line represents the variation of such a concentration as estimated from a mass balance ignoring the bacterial uptake of ethanol. Obviously, the deviation of the experimental curve from the theoretical one provides a measure of the amount of ethanol used and/or that entrained through aeration of the reactor. As can be seen, the differences were virtually negligible, and so were the bacterial uptake of ethanol and the amount of alcohol entrained as a result.

The mass balance performed relied on the assumption that the volumes of wine supplied and those in the culture medium were additive, so

$$V = V_0 + q_0 * t$$

$$X = X_0 + q_0 * C_i * t$$

$$E_{estimated} = \frac{X}{V} = \frac{X_0 + q_0 * C_i * t}{V_0 + q_0 * t} * 100$$

where  $V$  [L] is the volume of the fermentation medium at a given time during the loading process,  $V_0$  [L] the volume at the start of the loading process,  $q_0$  [L/h] the wine feed flow-rate,  $C_i$  [L/L] the ethanol concentration in the wine feed,  $E_{estimated}$  [°GL] that in the culture medium at a given time,  $X$  [L] the volume of ethanol in the fermentation tank at such a time and  $X_0$  the volume of ethanol in the tank at the start of the loading process.

The volumes of the wine feed and culture medium were previously confirmed to be additive.

However, this step can exhibit a different behaviour. Thus, the curve for the estimated variation of the ethanol concentration obtained on the assumption that the bacterial uptake of ethanol was negligible occasionally departed from the experimental curve (see Fig. 3).

Usually, this operational procedure substantially reduces ethanol entrainment losses—in some cases, such losses are negligible, but this must be properly checked. One way of assessing ethanol losses during a cycle is via the total strength of the medium, which is the combination of its alcoholic and acetic strengths. If the total strength remains constant throughout a cycle, then one can assume the absence of entrainment losses. Such was the case with the example of Fig. 3.

The differences between the mean values of the derivatives of the curves shown on Fig. 3 with respect to time over the first step provide an estimate of the mean oxidation rate during it:

$$\text{mean value of } \left( \frac{dE_{\text{estimated}}}{dt} - \frac{dE_{\text{experimental}}}{dt} \right)$$

in this example a value around 0.12 °GL/h is obtained.

Returning to the experiment shown on Fig. 1, during the second step, where the ethanol concentration is kept constant, the fermentation rate can be estimated from the temporal variation of the volume (see the staircase curve of Fig. 4). In order to estimate the fermentation rate, one can fit the experimental data to the following function:

$$V = a * e^{b*t}$$

where a and b are constants (see Fig. 4).

Therefore, the temporal variation of the volume will be directly proportional to the rate of ethanol uptake by bacteria:

$$\frac{dV}{dt} = b * a * e^{b*t} = b * V$$

$$\frac{1}{V} \frac{dV}{dt} = b$$

Because the specific rate of volume change is constant, so will the biological oxidation rate. The latter can be estimated from an balance of ethanol in the medium. The rate of ethanol uptake by transformation into acetic acid will coincide with the difference between the amount of ethanol added per litre of culture medium per hour and the increase in the amount of ethanol present in the reactor per litre of medium per hour. The amount of ethanol added per litre of medium per hour will be

$$\frac{1}{V} \frac{dV}{dt} * E_e$$

$E_e$  being the ethanol concentration in the wine feed (120 mL/L). Also, the increase in the amount of ethanol in the reactor per litre of culture medium per hour will be

$$\frac{1}{V} \frac{dV}{dt} * E_m$$

$E_m$  being the ethanol concentration in the medium, which, as noted earlier, was kept constant at 5% (50 mL/L). Therefore, the rate of ethanol uptake will be given by

$$(-r_E) = \frac{1}{V} \frac{dV}{dt} * E_e - \frac{1}{V} \frac{dV}{dt} * E_m$$

$$(-r_E) = (E_e - E_m) * \frac{1}{V} \frac{dV}{dt} = (E_e - E_m) b$$

$$[-r_E] = \frac{\text{ethanol uptake, ml}}{L * h}$$

$$\frac{^{\circ}GL}{h} = (-r_E) * \frac{1}{10}$$

1/10 being the conversion factor required to express the reaction rate in °GL/h.

In our case, the rate of ethanol uptake during this step will be

$$(-r_E) = (120 - 50) * 0.0209 * \frac{1}{10} = 0.146 \frac{^{\circ}GL}{h}$$

Finally, the oxidation rate in the last step (*viz.* between the end of the loading operation and immediately prior to unloading) can be directly determined from the slope a plot of the ethanol concentration against time. The rate thus obtained from Fig. 5 was 0.22 °GL/h.

The previous data can be used to estimate the mean overall rate of ethanol uptake during a cycle. This entails obtaining a weighed average as a function of the proportion of time taken by each step in the overall cycle. Thus, if the first, second and third step are assumed to take 4.5%, 45.3% and 50.2%, respectively, of the overall time (see Fig. 1), the mean overall rate of ethanol uptake will be

$$(-r_E)_{\text{global}} = 0.045 * (-r_E)_{\text{first step}} + 0.453 * (-r_E)_{\text{second step}} + 0.502 * (-r_E)_{\text{third step}}$$

which, upon substitution of the ethanol uptake rates, yields



$$(-r_E)_{global} = 0.045 * 0 + 0.453 * 0.146 + 0.502 * 0.224 = 0.179 \frac{^{\circ}GL}{h}$$

Besides, the mean reaction rate can also be calculated from the final acidity at the time the reactor is unloaded. Because such an acidity was 10.5 °Acetic acid, the unloaded volume 4 L, the cycle time 32.6 h and the mean overall fermentation volume 7.35 L, the reaction rate was

$$(r_A) = \frac{\text{final acetic acid concentration} \left( \frac{\text{g acetic acid}}{\text{L medium}} \right) * \text{unloaded volume (L medium)}}{\text{cycle time (h)} * \text{mean overall volume (L)}}$$

$$(r_A) = \frac{\frac{10.5 \text{ g acetic acid}}{0.1 \text{ L medium}} * 4 \text{ L medium}}{32.6 \text{ h} * 7.35 \text{ L}} = 1.75 \frac{\text{g acetic acid}}{\text{L h}} \Rightarrow 0.175 \frac{^{\circ}\text{acetic acid}}{\text{h}}$$

Taking into account that 1 °GL is approximately equal to 1 °Acetic acid, the  $(r_A)$  value differs by only 3% from  $(-r_E)_{global}$

## CONCLUSIONS

The proposed method allows the simple, fast estimation of the mean acetification rate during a typical semi-continuous vinegar production cycle. To this end, it uses the variation of the ethanol concentration during a cycle, which can be readily determined on-line and allows the mean biological oxidation rate in each step of the process to be conveniently estimated.

These data allow one to accurately quantify bacterial activity during an acetification cycle and the way it is influenced by the operating conditions with a view to identifying the specific steps most markedly affected by changes in such conditions.

In the absence of ethanol entrainment losses, the mean overall acetification rate should coincide with that estimated from the final acidity of the culture medium immediately prior to unloading the reactor.

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**FIGURE CAPTIONS**

Figure 1. Variation of the ethanol concentration and volume during a typical wine acetification cycle.

Figure 2. Variation of experimental and estimated (bold line) ethanol concentration as well as volume during the first loading stage in a typical wine acetification cycle.

Figure 3. Variation of experimental and estimated ethanol concentration during the first loading stage, once bacterial uptake of alcohol has started, in a wine acetification cycle.

Figure 4. Variation of experimental and fitted (discontinuous line) volume during the second loading step.

Figure 5. Variation of experimental and fitted ethanol concentration during the final step of the cycle.

Figure 1

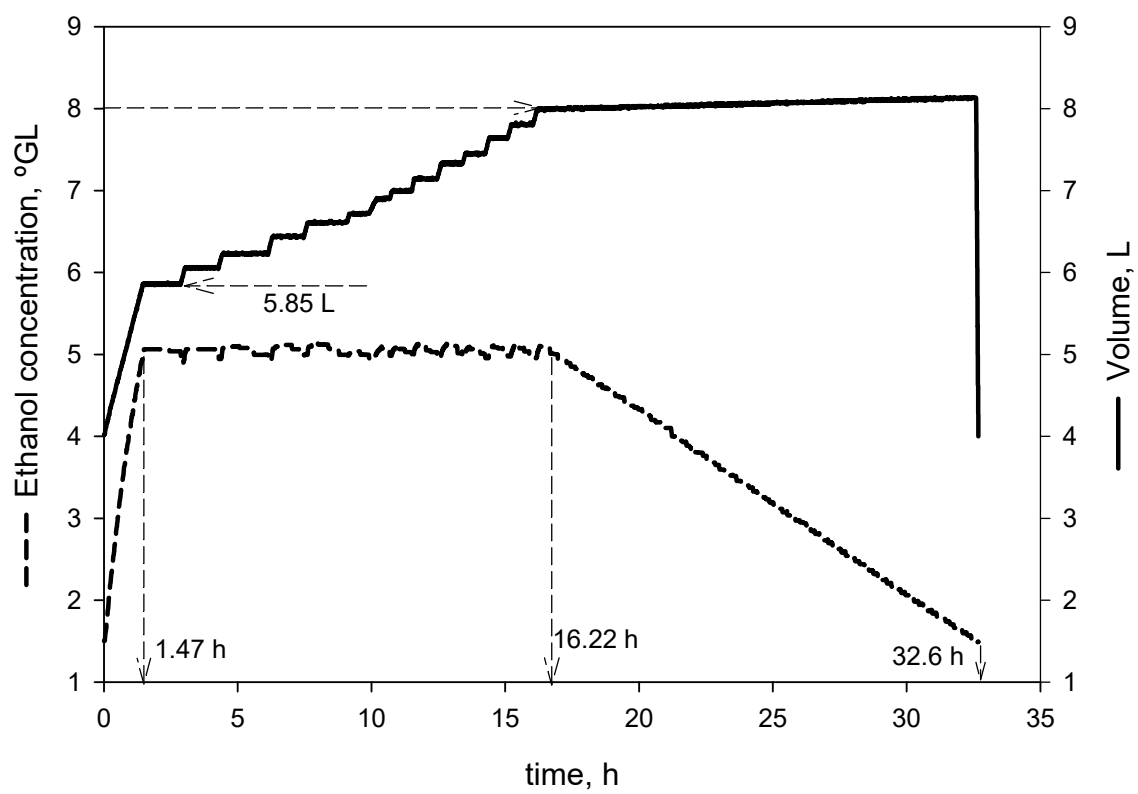


Figure 2

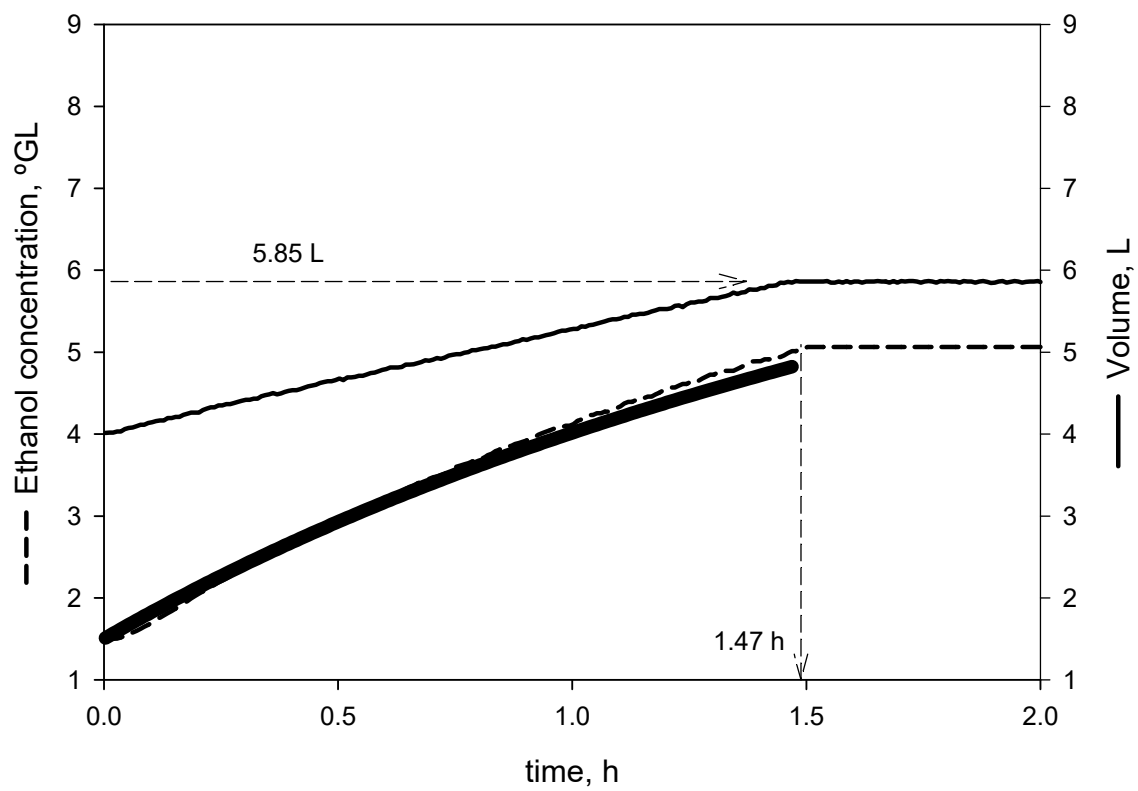


Figure 3

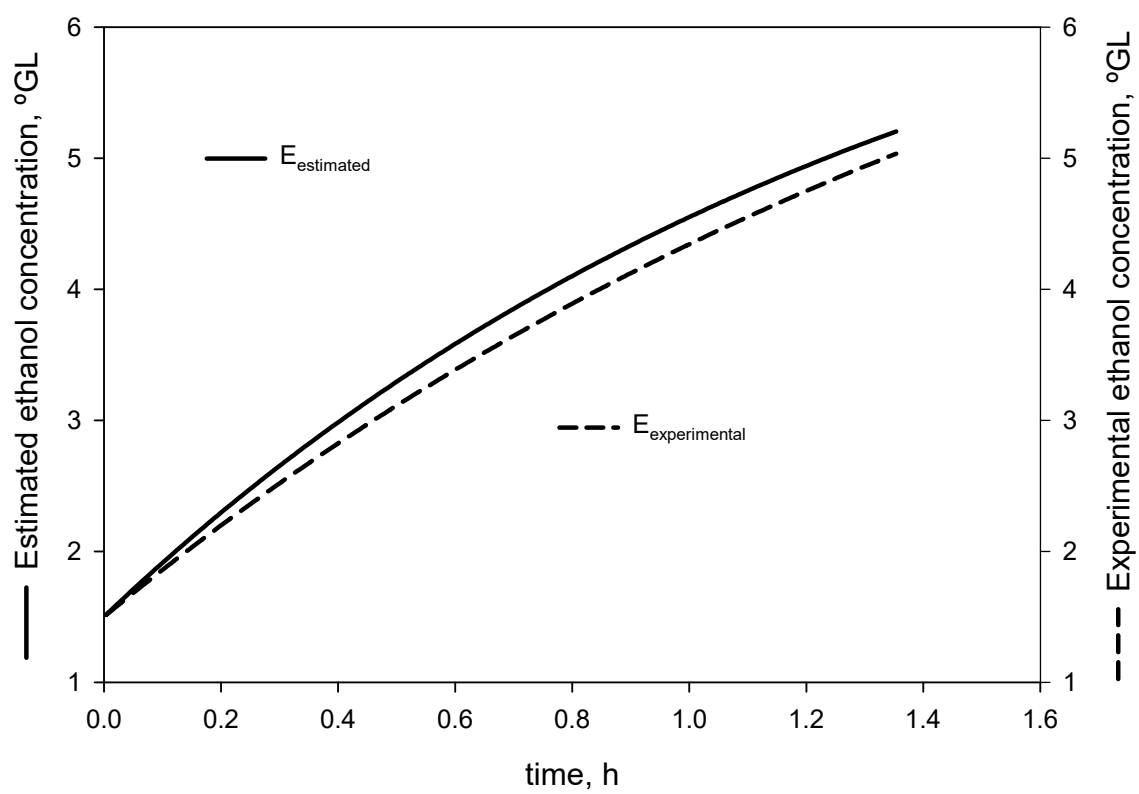


Figure 4

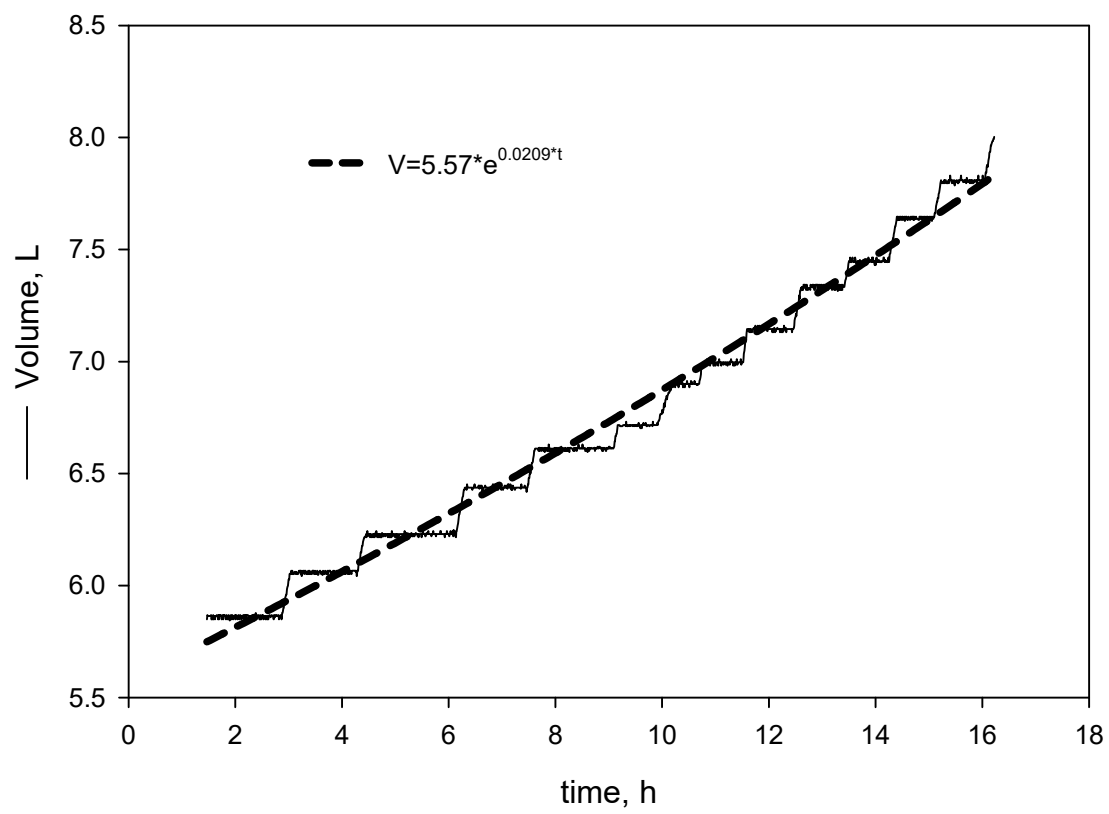




Figure 5

