



P-functionalization of Ni Fe – Electrocatalysts from Prussian blue analogue for enhanced anode in anion exchange membrane water electrolyzers

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ABSTRACT

Efficient hydrogen generation from water-splitting is widely acknowledged as a priority route to promote the hydrogen economy. Anion exchange membrane water electrolyzers (AEMWE) offer multiple advantages in improving performance and minimizing the cost limitations of current electrolysis technologies. However, the persistence of issues related to the limited electrocatalytic activity of such materials and their poor stability under operating conditions makes developing highly active, stable, platinum-group-metal-free electrocatalysts for oxygen evolution reaction (OER) necessary.

We report the development of Prussian blue analogues (PBA)-derived NiFe-based electrocatalysts through a mild aqueous phase precipitation method, followed by thermal stabilization and phosphorus doping. The formation of the NiFe-PBA-precursor with a framework nanocubic Ni(II)[Fe(III)(CN)₆]_{2/3} structure was confirmed by X-ray diffraction, scanning electron microscopy, and inductively coupled plasma analysis. The NiFe-PBA-precursor was subjected to thermal stabilization and phosphorus doping to provide the material with enhanced OER catalytic activity and stability. The existence of OER active sites based on NiFe and NiFeP has been revealed by transmission electron microscopy, X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy, and electrochemical characterization in a three-electrode cell configuration in a 1 M KOH electrolyte. NiFe-PBA and NiFeP-PBA were assembled at the anode side of an AEMWE, resulting in an excellent electrochemical performance both in terms of current density at 2.0 V using 1 M KOH (1.21 A cm⁻²) and durability, outperforming the benchmark catalyst.

1. Introduction

In the coming years, the decarbonization process must be urgently addressed in line with the growing energy demand.[1] For these reasons, many efforts are increasingly focused on developing sustainable energy storage and conversion technologies, such as fuel cells and batteries, that can meet net-zero emission requirements with high performance.[2–13] In this scenario, hydrogen production has become strategic in this global energy transition. Indeed, H₂ is an advantageous energy carrier ready to convert renewable but intermittent sources into energy-dense hydrogen fuels that can be stored and used in transportation and industrial processes.[14–16].

Producing green hydrogen by water electrolysis technologies (WEs) at low temperature (<100 °C) is considered an efficient, clean, and long-

term solution. [17] Among WEs, proton exchange membrane water electrolyzer (PEMWE) and the emerging anion exchange membrane water electrolyzer (AEMWE) are the promising ones.[18] AEMWEs are particularly interesting because, in these devices, the advantages of more mature technologies are combined: key components without platinum-group-metal (PGM) materials like the alkaline WEs (AWEs) and high purity H₂ (99.99 %) production at a high current and high pressure like in PEMWEs. Another critical aspect of an AEMWE is that it can be fed with pure water or a low-alkalinity solution as the electrolyte. This results in reduced equipment corrosion and lower costs, thus improving the life of the electrolyzer. [19–23].

One of the major bottlenecks in AEMWEs is the limiting oxygen evolution reaction (OER) catalysis, so overcoming it with a favorable kinetic catalyst is paramount. Ruthenium dioxide (RuO₂) and iridium

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dioxide (IrO_2), belonging to PGM materials, are considered benchmark catalysts for OER due to their efficiency and low overpotentials (η). [24] However, large-scale applications are limited due to their stability problems (especially with acid electrolytes), high costs, and environmental impact.

Several PGM-free electrocatalysts have been proposed to improve OER electrocatalytic activity, lower the overpotential, and further improve the energy efficiency of AEMWEs. [25–29] Transition metal (TM)-based structures, such as oxides, carbides, nitrides, phosphides, phosphates, sulfides, and chalcogenides have been investigated to replace PGM materials. [19,30–36] Among the different families, TM-based oxides (TMOs), chalcogenides (TMCs), and phosphides (TMPs) are particularly promising since they offer the possibility of tailoring the electrocatalytic activity via heteroatom doping [37,38], the introduction of polymetallic sites [39–42], compounding with highly conductive materials [43], stress engineering [44] and heterostructure engineering. [45,46] Previous studies indicated that TMPs are particularly suited as OER electrocatalysts for water electrolysis due to their abundance and efficient electrocatalysis. [32,34,47–50] Metal phosphides doped with heteroatoms, rather than monometallic phosphides, have demonstrated improved catalytic activity due to the modified electronic structures, with the choice of TM playing a critical role. [51] Combining Ni with other TMs (e.g. Fe, Co, Mn, etc.) significantly improves OER activity in alkaline media [52–61], and, in particular, Fe-Ni-based catalysts have attracted attention due to their excellent results and low environmental impact. [56,57,62–65].

A crucial aspect in the development of an efficient electroactive catalyst is the design of its structure/morphology. Using metal–organic frameworks (MOFs) allows for precise tuning of crystal structure, with ligand type and metal geometry playing key roles in the overall catalytic performance of the final material. [66–68] As a subcategory of MOFs, prussian blue analogues (PBA) are coordination polymers assembled from octahedral coordination cyanide bridge metal nodes with a parent structure of $\text{M}[\text{M}'(\text{CN})_6]$ where M and M' are transition metals (TM). Among PBAs, hexacyanoferrates ($\text{Fe}(\text{CN})_6^{3-}$) offer a wide selection of metal nodes, microporous nature, and unique vacancy/defect arrangement. [69] The typical composition of hexacyanoferrates can be expressed as $\text{M}_x[\text{Fe}(\text{CN})_6]_y$, where M is commonly a transition metal (TM), such as Ni, Co, Fe, or Mn. [70] When the choice of metals and their oxidation state are varied, it is possible to alter the lattice parameters by stretching the hexacyanometallates structure to compensate for electroneutrality. [71,72] Nanostructured PBAs have recently been converted into metal oxides, sulfides, and functional phosphides while retaining their electron transfer properties. The synthesis, which generally takes place by chemical precipitation under soft conditions, allows extensive control over the composition of the material. [73–76] Moreover, the open skeleton structure composed of cyanide ligands and metal central ions enables the formation of uniformly distributed and adjustable metal active sites that can be tailored for specific electrochemical reactions. [77–79] Based on these features, PBAs have been recently evaluated for environmental and energy applications, such as sensors, contaminant removal, metal-ion batteries, and water splitting [80–87].

In this work, we developed PBA-derived NiFe-based electrocatalysts and investigated their performance as electrocatalysts for OER in AEMWEs. The synthesis occurs under mild conditions in an aqueous environment at room temperature, obtaining a PBA precursor with Ni(II) $[\text{Fe}(\text{III})(\text{CN})_6]_{2/3}$ as crystal structure. To overcome the intrinsic limits of the PBA precursor in terms of limited electronic conductivity and electrochemical stability, it was thermally treated at 350 °C under inert conditions in the presence of a P-precursor for heteroatom doping. Through a series of morphological, structural, and electrochemical characterizations, the optimized electrocatalysts were assembled in AEMWE, demonstrating high OER activity and stability.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Materials

Nickel (II) acetate tetrahydrate (>99.9 %), trisodium citrate dihydrate (>99.0 %), potassium ferricyanide (III) (>99.9 %), sodium hypophosphite monohydrate (>99.9 %), IrO_2 (>99.9 %) and Nafion solution (5 wt% in lower aliphatic alcohols and water, 15–20 %), 2-propanol (99.9 %) were purchased from Sigma-Aldrich. Millipore water (18.2 M Ω cm@25 °C) was used for material preparation and experiments.

2.2. Synthesis of the electrocatalysts

1.92 g of nickel (II) acetate tetrahydrate $\text{Ni}(\text{CH}_3\text{COO})_2$ and 2.26 g of trisodium citrate dihydrate were solubilized in 50 mL of deionized water under stirring at room temperature (about 250 rpm). Then, 50 mL of a 64 mM $\text{K}_3\text{Fe}(\text{CN})_6$ aqueous solution was added and kept stirring at room temperature overnight. The obtained precipitate was collected, centrifuged, washed, and dried at 70 °C and labeled as NiFe-PBA-precursor.

NiFe-PBA-precursor was heat-treated at 350 °C (3 °C min⁻¹ heating rate) for 2 h under N_2 flow, obtaining the sample labeled as NiFe-PBA. A further sample was obtained by using sodium hypophosphite (NaH_2PO_2) as a P-doping agent during the thermal treatment. As shown in Fig. S1, this process is carried out with two shuttles, one containing NaH_2PO_2 (upstream to the N_2 flow) and one containing NiFe-PBA-precursor (downstream), with a mass ratio of 2:1, respectively. The obtained sample was labeled as NiFeP-PBA.

2.3. Material characterization

Element quantification was performed by atomic emission spectroscopy on the Spectroblue TI FMT26 inductively coupled plasma – optical emission spectroscopy (ICP-OES) equipment. Before analysis, the sample was dried in an oven at 120 °C for two hours. Once dried, it was homogenized and grounded in an agate mortar. The mixture was then digested by oxidative alkaline fusion with sodium peroxide, followed by acid dilution with HCl to obtain a solution. Finally, this solution was filtered with a 0.45 μm pore size filter. Besides, Elemental Analysis (C, H, N) was determined on a Thermo Flash 1112 Elemental Analyser.

Transmission electron microscope (TEM) images and selected-area electron diffraction (SAED) pattern were acquired with a Tecnai F30 microscope operated at 300 kV, alongside images obtained in the scanning transmission mode with a high-angle annular dark-field detector (STEM-HAADF). The samples were ultrasonically dispersed in ethanol for 15 min and then placed in a Cu carbon grid. On the other hand, Scanning Electron Micrographs (SEM) were obtained using a Leo Supra 35 field-emission scanning electron microscope (Carl Zeiss, Oberkochen, Germany).

Powder X-ray diffraction (XRD) patterns were recorded using a Philips PW1730 and ESCAPlus of Omicron diffractometers with Cu K α radiation ($\lambda = 1.5406 \text{ \AA}$). Thermogravimetric analysis (TGA) was performed by using a thermogravimetric analyzer TGA/DSC1 Star System (Mettler Toledo) working between 25 to 700 °C under an N_2 flow, with a heating rate of 5 °C min⁻¹. The materials were held in a platinum sample holder with a cover having one central vent hole.

X-ray photoelectron spectra (XPS) were obtained in a ESCA Plus Omicron spectrometer equipped with a hemispherical electron analyzer with an Al anode (1486.7 eV) at 225 W with passing energy of 50 eV in the survey analysis and 20 eV in the high-resolution regions. The C 1 s line at 284.6 eV was employed for charge correction of all XPS spectra. CasaXPS software was used to perform peak fitting and quantification, and Shirley-type background was used for all peaks. A 70 %/30 % Gaussian/Lorentzian line shape was used to deconvolute the high-resolution spectrum for each component.

Electrochemical tests were performed using a standard three-

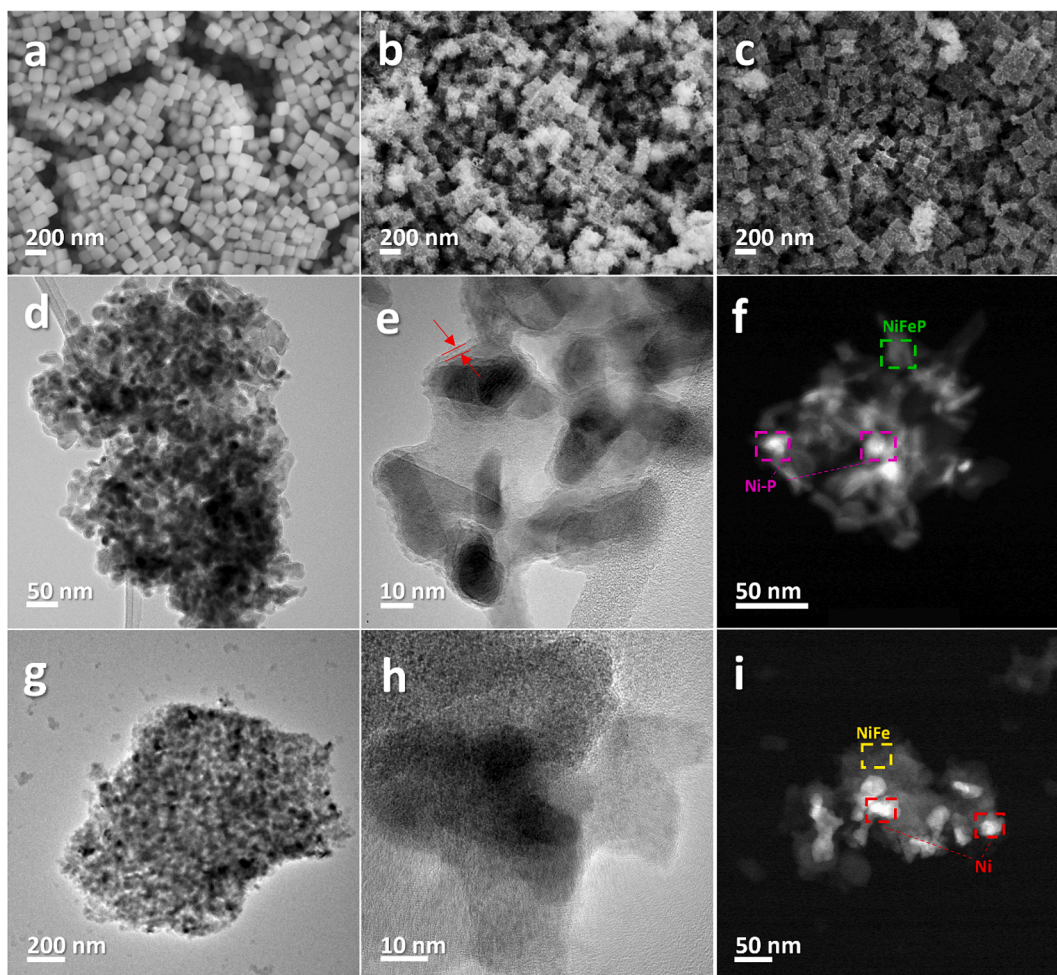


Fig. 1. SEM images of (a) NiFe-PBA-precursor, (b) NiFe-PBA, and (c) NiFeP-PBA. (d-e) TEM and (f) HAADF-STEM of NiFeP-PBA, (g-h) TEM and (i) HAADF-STEM of NiFe-PBA.

electrode cell: a rotating disk electrode setup (636 PAR AMETEK) with a rotating disc electrode (RDE-GC5009 Pine Research) or a rotating ring disc electrode (RRDE-AFE6R2GCPT, Pine Research) as the working electrodes (WE), while a graphite rod was used as the counter electrode (CE) and a Hg|HgO (RE – F0038) as the reference electrode (RE). Measurements were recorded with a VMP3 potentiostat (Bio-Logic Science Instruments) controlled by a computer using EC-Lab V10.18 software. Potential values for all electrochemical tests were measured against Hg|HgO and converted to the reversible hydrogen electrode (RHE), using the Nernst equation $E_{RHE} = E_{Hg|HgO} + 0.154 \text{ V} + 0.059 \times \text{pH}$, and the overpotential (η) value was determined by $\eta = E_{RHE} - 1.23 \text{ V}$.

Before the electrochemical tests, the WE was polished with an alumina slurry (0.3 μm particle size). The catalytic inks were prepared by dispersing 3.4 mg of catalyst in 425 ml of 2-propanol solution and 75 μL of Nafion/ H_2O (0.5 wt%). The suspension was ultrasonicated for 15 min at room temperature. The ink was then drop-casted onto the WE glassy carbon disk at a catalyst loading of 0.20 mg cm^{-2} and dried at room temperature. IrO_2 was used as a reference catalyst for OER. The IrO_2 ink was prepared using 1 mg of IrO_2 (99.9%), 150 μL of 2-propanol, 14 μL of water and 6 μL of Nafion (5 wt%). The suspension was ultrasonicated for 15–20 min. The total IrO_2 loading was 0.2 mg cm^{-2} .

The tests were carried out in a three-electrode configuration with 1 M KOH as an electrolyte solution, purged with N_2 for 20 min. Before testing, the catalysts were activated by cyclic voltammetry (CV) in a potential window of 1.2 to 0.6 V vs. RHE at a scan rate of 50 mV s^{-1} (25 cycles). To investigate the synthesized catalysts' electrochemical active

surface area (ECSA), cyclic voltammetry (CV) experiments were performed using an RDE in a static configuration. Gravimetric capacitance (C_{Grav}) was determined by integrating the capacitive current from the CV curves at a scan rate of 5 mV s^{-1} , in an N_2 -saturated electrolyte over a potential window of 0.02 V to -0.1 V vs. RHE, according to the following equation [88]:

$$C_{Grav} = \frac{\int IdV}{2m\nu\Delta V} \quad (1)$$

Where i , is the current (A), ΔV is the potential window (V), m is the mass of catalyst on the electrode (g) and ν (V s^{-1}) is the potential scan rate. Thus, the ECSA was estimated based on Eq. (2), assuming a capacitance per surface area (C_s) of 0.04 mF cm^{-2} . [89]

$$ECSA = \frac{C_{Grav}}{C_s} \quad (2)$$

Linear sweep voltammetry (LSV) curves were acquired with RDE to evaluate the performance of the OER. Experiments were conducted at a scan rate of 10 mV s^{-1} and a rotational speed of 1600 rpm from 1.7 to 1.0 V vs. RHE under N_2 -saturated conditions to evaluate the OER. Disk currents were corrected from the background by subtracting the capacitive current measured in the N_2 -saturated electrolyte, and reported potentials were compensated with it (85 %). The LSV of the electrocatalytic electrode was converted into a Tafel plot using the overpotential (η) vs. $\log j$ relation ($\eta = b \log |j| + a$); the Tafel slope (b) reflects the reaction mechanism of the catalysts. Additionally,

chronopotentiometry (at $J = 10 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$) and LSV were used to analyze the durability and activity of the most active electrocatalyst after and before the stability test. Electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) spectra were recorded at a current density of 10 mA cm^{-2} (corresponding to E_{J10}) over a frequency range of 50 kHz to 100 Hz at a 10 mV amplitude (rms). According to previous works [48,90], the faradaic oxygen efficiency was determined by chronoamperometry measurement at 1 mA cm^{-2} , polarizing the Pt ring electrode at 0.4 V vs. RHE for promoting the oxygen reduction reaction (ORR). The faradaic oxygen efficiency ϵ was estimated using the following expression: $\epsilon = (4/n_{\text{ORR}}) \cdot i_{\text{ring}} / (N \cdot i_{\text{disk}})$, where n_{ORR} indicates the number of electrons transferred per O_2 molecule ($n_{\text{ORR}} = 4$ for the Pt ring), N is the RRDE collection efficiency (0.248).

2.4. MEA preparation and AEMWE tests

The tests in AEMWE were carried out using Pt/C as the cathode catalyst, while NiFeP-PBA, NiFe-PBA, and IrO_2 were used at the anode. The cathodes were made by spraying a catalytic ink based on Pt/C (40 wt% platinum on carbon, Alfa-Aesar) with 20 wt% FAA3 as ionomer (Fumion FAA-3-SOLUT-10, 10 wt% in *N*-methyl-2-pyrrolidone, Fuma-Tech) onto a Sigracet 39 BC gas diffusion electrode to a Pt loading of 0.23 mg cm^{-2} .

The anodes were prepared by spraying the catalytic ink based on either IrO_2 , NiFe-PBA, or NiFeP-PBA (20 % wt.% FAA3 ionomer) directly onto the anion exchange membrane (Fumasep® anionic membrane, FAA3-50, FumaTech) to obtain a catalyst-coated membrane (CCM). The catalyst loading was 1.6 for IrO_2 and 2 mg cm^{-2} for NiFe-PBA and NiFeP-PBA. The CCM was coupled with a Ni-fibre matrix (2Ni06-20, Bekaert) sheet to act as a porous transport layer at the anode side.

The cathode and CCM-membrane were combined into a Membrane-Electrode Assembly (MEA) by hot pressing (2.5 MPa, 60 °C, 5 min). Before testing, the MEA (bromide form) was exchanged using a 1 M KOH aqueous solution for 1 h, as previously reported. [91,92] Electrochemical characterizations were then carried out in a single-cell configuration (5 cm^2 geometric area of the electrodes) at 60 °C and atmospheric pressure. An aqueous electrolyte solution was supplied to the anode and the cathode sides (0.1–1 M KOH) with a flow rate of 6 mL min^{-1} . Electrochemical measurements for AEMWE were carried out using a PGSTAT302N potentiostat–galvanostat equipped with a 20 A booster (Metrohm). Polarization curves were obtained by varying the current from 0 to 1.6 A cm^{-2} and measuring the cell voltage. Electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) analysis was used to determine the cell resistances. EIS was performed under potentiostatic conditions at a cell voltage of 1.5 V, in a frequency range of 1000 – 0.01 Hz, using frequency sweeps in single sinusoidal mode. Durability tests were carried out in 0.1 M KOH (changing it with a fresh electrolyte every 50 h) by setting a potential of 1.8 V and measuring the current over time.

3. Results and discussion

NiFe-PBA and NiFeP-PBA were obtained via a mild aqueous phase precipitation method, followed by thermal stabilization and phosphorus doping. First, a $\text{M}[\text{M}'(\text{CN})_6]$ precursor was obtained, using nickel(II) acetate as an M source and hexacyanoferrate(III) anion as $\text{M}'(\text{CN})_6$ source, in the presence of trisodium citrate for promoting the ion exchange process and precipitation of $\text{Ni}_3[\text{Fe}(\text{CN})_6]_2$ (NiFe-PBA-precursor). Thermal stabilization was carried out at 350 °C in an inert atmosphere without and with sodium hypophosphite, obtaining NiFe-PBA and the P-enriched analogous NiFeP-PBA.

Fig. 1 shows SEM and TEM images of NiFe-PBA-precursor, NiFe-PBA, and NiFeP-PBA, revealing the effect of heat treatment on the NiFe-PBA precursor at a morphological and compositional level. As can be seen in Fig. 1a, the NiFe-PBA-precursor is characterized by a cubic shape with edges of 150 nm; the cubic morphology is preserved even after the heat

treatment, as indicated by SEM images of NiFe-PBA and NiFeP-PBA (Fig. 1b and 1c, respectively). Based on the thermogravimetric analysis reported in Fig. S2, 350 °C as heat treatment temperature allows removing the thermally unstable phases while preserving the structure of the NiFe-PBA-precursor. In agreement with previous works investigating the effect of temperature on the catalytic activity of PBA-based compounds towards OER, the heat treatment is expected to promote the exposure of active sites, significantly improving the material's stability [93]. SEM images of NiFe-PBA and NiFeP-PBA revealed the presence of homogeneous cubic nanoparticles, which were studied in more detail by transmission electron microscopy (TEM).

Fig. 1d and 1g show TEM images of NiFeP-PBA and NiFe-PBA, respectively, indicating that the cubic nanoparticles are formed by agglomerates of smaller particles of homogeneous dimensions of approximately ~30–40 nm, corresponding to the lighter areas in HAADF images (Fig. 1f and 1i) and consist of NiP- and Ni-based (violet and red dashed areas respectively) and NiFeP and NiFe-based nanoparticles (green and yellow dashed area). At higher magnifications (Fig. 1e and 1h), the nanoparticles in NiFeP-PBA appear to be more sharply defined than in NiFe-PBA. TEM-HAADF analysis also confirmed the effectiveness of P-functionalization in the NiFeP-PBA sample. In particular, as indicated by the red arrows in Fig. 1e, the NiFeP-PBA sample shows a thin outer layer formation, which can be traced back to P. This finding can be explained since phosphine gas is released upon the thermal decomposition of sodium hypophosphite, covering the NiFe-PBA structure as previously highlighted by previous works reporting similar P-functionalization methods. [48,94,95]

Elemental analysis carried out on the samples indicated that carbon content is less than 4 wt%. The Ni, Fe, and P content in the samples was evaluated through Inductively Coupled Plasma Optical Emission Spectroscopy (ICP-OES) analysis and reported in Table 1.

In both samples, the Ni/Fe molar ratio is 3:2, in agreement with Ni(II)[Fe(III)(CN)₆]_{2/3} crystal structure. The XRD patterns of NiFe-PBA-precursor, NiFe-PBA, and NiFeP-PBA are shown in Fig. 2. The diffractogram of the NiFe-PBA-precursor corresponds to the pattern of the $\text{Ni}_3[\text{Fe}(\text{CN})_6]_2 \cdot \text{H}_2\text{O}$ face-centered cubic crystal structure (JCPDS sheet

Table 1
Ni, Fe, and P content in NiFe-PBA and NiFeP-PBA samples.

Sample	Ni (wt.%)	Fe (wt.%)	P (wt. %)
NiFe-PBA	27.0 ± 0.2	17.3 ± 0.7	–
NiFeP-PBA	26.3 ± 0.1	16.6 ± 0.3	11.6 ± 0.1

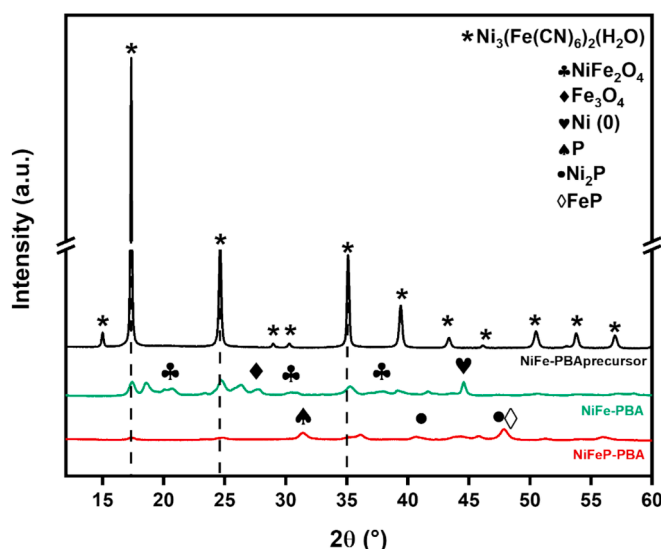


Fig. 2. X-ray diffractograms of NiFe-PBA-precursor, NiFe-PBA, and NiFeP-PBA.

No. 96–151-6493). As already predicted by TGA analysis (Fig. S2), after thermal treatment, NiFe-PBA and NiFeP-PBA partially retain the crystallinity of the precursor, as can be seen from the peaks at $2\theta = 17.4$, 24.6 , and 35.1° , but secondary metal phases were also observed. [87] The NiFe-PBA sample shows the presence of a nickel ferrite (NiFe_2O_4) phase (JCPDS sheet No. 96–901-0942) at $2\theta = 18.6$, 20.8 , and 39.3° and an iron (II, III) oxide (Fe_3O_4) phase (JCPDS sheet No. 96–901-4005) as can be seen from the peak at $2\theta = 27.9^\circ$. Additionally, the presence of Ni (0) (JCPDS 96–901-0942) at $2\theta = 44.6^\circ$ confirms the presence of metallic Ni, previously observed in HAADF-STEM analysis (Fig. 1i). The XRD pattern of NiFeP-PBA shows the presence of phosphorus (P) (JCPDS sheet No. 96–154-1405) at $2\theta = 31.4^\circ$. P-Ni and P-Fe phases are also observed as evidenced by Ni_2P nickel phosphide (JCPDS sheet no. 96–153-3385) at $2\theta = 40.7$, 47.8° (consistent with HAADF-STEM analysis Fig. 1f) and FeP (JCPDS sheet no. 96–152-8059) at $2\theta = 48.3^\circ$.

The surface stoichiometry of NiFe-PBA and NiFeP-PBA catalysts was determined by XPS (Fig. 3). Fig. 3a reveals the XPS survey spectra, indicating the presence of C, N, O, Fe, and Ni in NiFe-PBA and NiFeP-PBA, the latter including the presence of P. The deconvolution of Ni $2p_{3/2}$, Fe $2p_{3/2}$, and P 2p peaks are shown in Fig. 3b–d to investigate the element speciation. Table S1-3 shows the relative percentage of Ni, Fe, and P species and the associated binding energy (BE) obtained from the high-resolution XPS spectra of Ni $2p_{3/2}$, Fe $2p_{3/2}$, and P 2p.

STEM images in Fig. S3a and S3c show the lattice fringes corresponding to NiP and P domains for the NiFeP-PBA sample, and Ni(0) and NiFe_2O_4 for the NiFe-PBA sample. The selected area electron diffraction (SAED) patterns are shown in Fig. S3b and S3d, corroborating the polycrystalline nature of both NiFe-PBA and NiFeP-PBA, as highlighted by HAADF-STEM images in Fig. 1, and XRD analysis (Fig. 2). Compared

to the bulk crystal structure observed by XRD, SAED patterns indicate that the arrangement of atoms on the near surface is slightly more amorphous, as envisaged from the wider broadening of the concentric circles. This effect is related to the heat treatment, particularly evident in NiFeP-PBA sample, where the reduced presence of lattice interference patterns suggests the homogeneous presence of an amorphous phosphorus layer.

Ni(II) was observed at 855.3 eV in the NiFe-PBA sample, which agrees with the presence of nickel ferrite (NiFe_2O_4) as revealed by XRD analysis. The Ni $2p_{3/2}$ deconvolution of NiFe-PBA also indicated the presence of Ni(0) at BE of 852.3 eV. This phase is associated with metal Ni and Ni-Fe alloy phases, in good agreement with XRD and HAADF-EDS analysis. The NiFeP-PBA sample shows the presence of Ni(II) (856.6 eV), with a minor contribution of Ni(III) (862.3 eV). The formation of Ni-P bonds, evident from HAADF-EDS and XRD analysis, was confirmed by the deconvoluted Ni 2p peaks at 852.9 eV.

For NiFeP-PBA and NiFe-PBA, iron is mainly distributed as Fe (III), with a lower percentage of Fe (II), confirming the partial preservation of the structure of the starting NiFe-PBA-precursor. NiFe-PBA also indicated the presence of Fe (0), which can be observed from the peak at 707.4 eV BE, while the occurrence of Fe-P bonds is evident for the NiFeP-PBA sample.

Deconvolution of the P 2p spectrum shows the presence of the peaks associated with P $2p_{3/2}$ and P $2p_{1/2}$ at 128.8 eV and 129.8 eV, as well as the presence of C-P / P-O (132.7 eV and 133.7 eV, respectively) and C-O-P (134.7 eV and 135.7 eV), compatible with phosphide, phosphorus oxide, and phosphorus bound to the partially preserved structure of the NiFe-PBA-precursor. [96–98]

Fig. 4 shows the electrochemical characterization of the NiFe-PBA

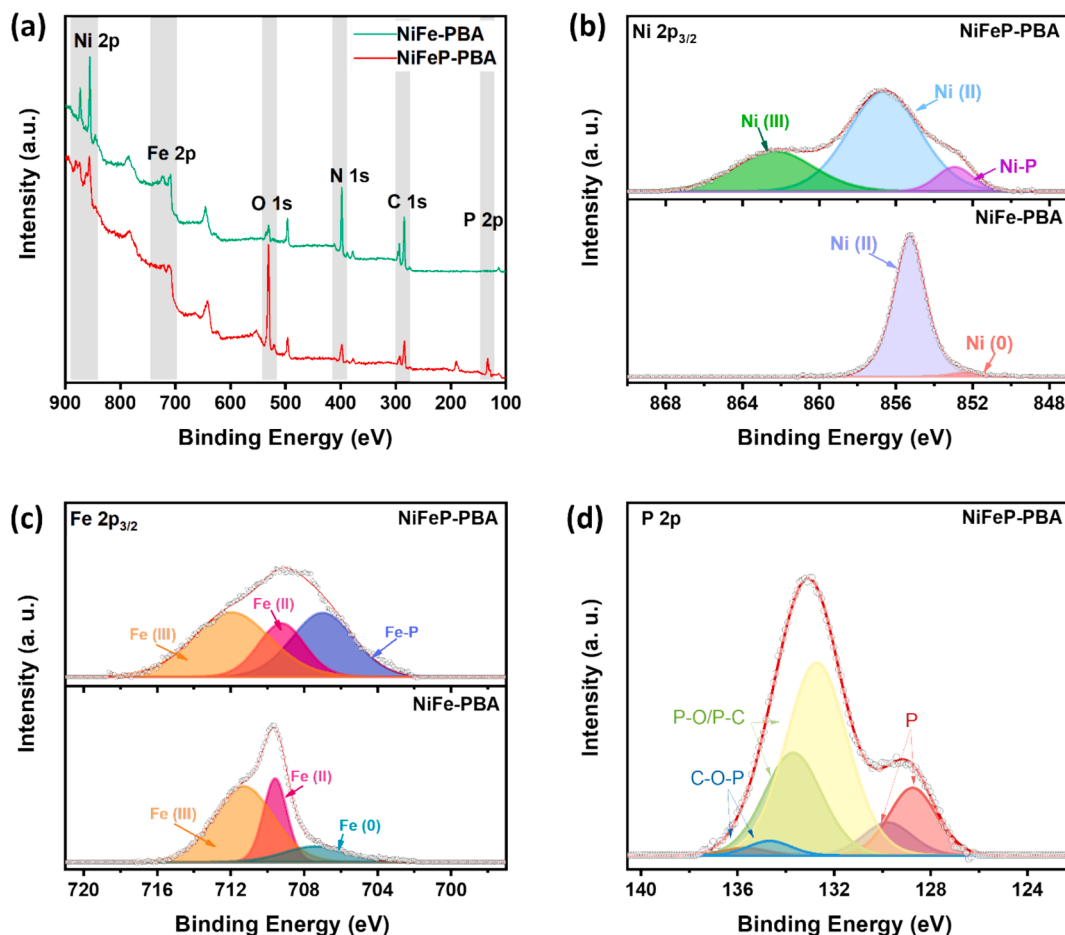


Fig. 3. XPS survey scans of NiFe-PBA and NiFeP-PBA (a), deconvoluted high-resolution XPS spectra for Ni 2p (b), Fe 2p (c), and P 2p (d).

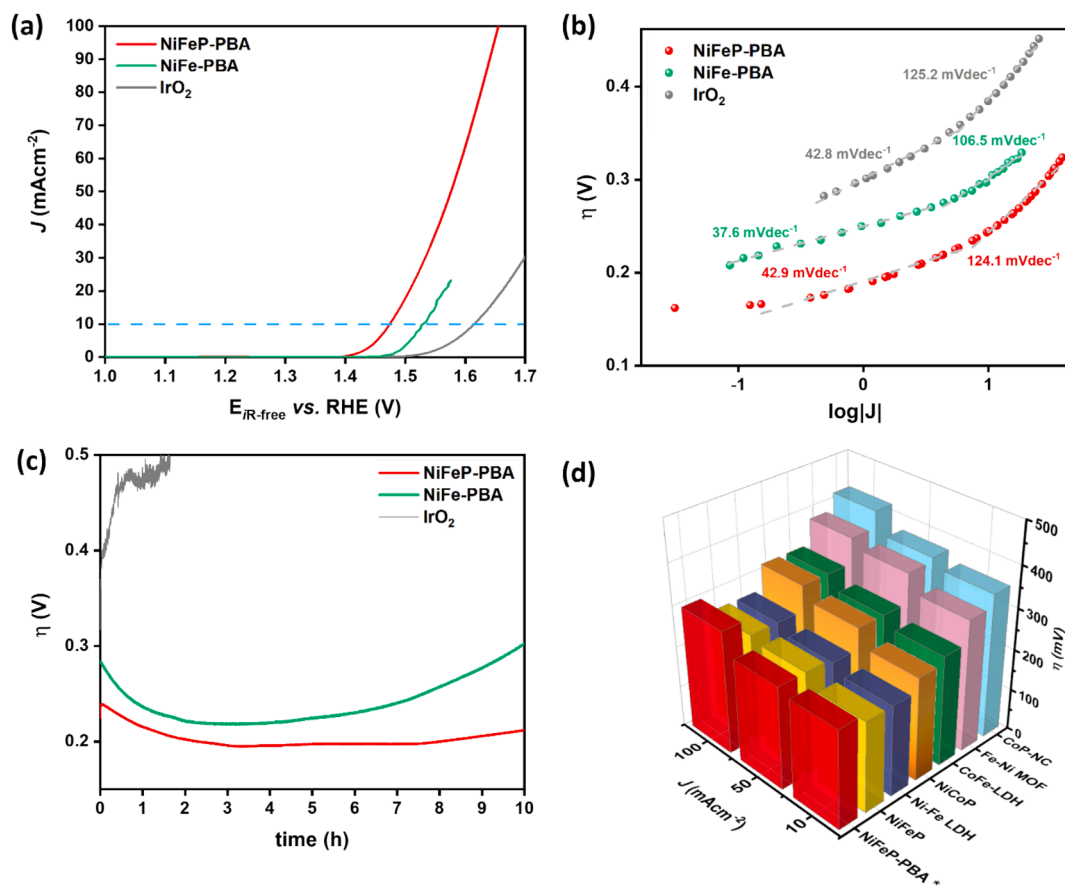


Fig. 4. (a) Polarization curves of IrO₂, NiFe-PBA, and NiFeP-PBA at 10 mVs⁻¹, 1600 rpm in 1 M KOH; (b) Tafel slope of NiFeP-PBA, NiFe-PBA, and IrO₂, (c) chronopotentiometry test at 10 mA cm⁻² under dynamic conditions (1600 rpm), and (d) literature performance comparison (η @10, 50, 100 mA cm⁻²) for similar systems: NiFeP [104], Ni-Fe LDH [105], NiCoP [106], CoFe-LDH [107], Fe-Ni MOF [108], CoP-NC [94].

and NiFeP-PBA samples in a half-cell configuration using 1.0 M KOH as an electrolyte solution, and a performance comparison with literature data obtained for similar PGM-free catalysts. Hydrodynamic voltammetry with RDE was carried out to evaluate the OER activity of the NiFeP-PBA and NiFe-PBA samples, and Fig. 4a shows the polarization curves of NiFeP-PBA and NiFe-PBA compared with that of IrO₂ catalyst that represents, together with RuO₂, the benchmark electrocatalysts for OER.[99] Potential values at 10 mA cm⁻² current density of (E_{J10}) are 1.47 V and 1.52 V vs. RHE for NiFeP-PBA and NiFe-PBA, respectively. Both values outperformed the activity of the commercial IrO₂, which instead has an $E_{J10} = 1.61$ V vs. RHE. The NiFeP-PBA showed a decreased overpotential for OER (50 mV) compared to NiFe-PBA, suggesting that P-functionalization boosts OER activity. As previously observed by Grimaud and coworkers, the anchoring of P sites on the active electrocatalytic interface promotes the oxidation of OH⁻ with the formation of the O-O bond by promoting interfacial transfer kinetics within the Helmholtz plane. [100,101].

The Tafel analysis (Fig. 4b) indicated two slopes for both catalysts: one around ~ 40 mV dec⁻¹ (37.6 mV dec⁻¹ for NiFe-PBA and 42.9 mV dec⁻¹ for NiFeP-PBA) and another one around ~ 118 mV dec⁻¹ (106.5 mV dec⁻¹ for NiFe-PBA and 124.1 mV dec⁻¹ for NiFeP-PBA). The first slope can be associated with the dominant surface coverage of M at low overpotential, where M is the active site (Step A: $M^* \rightarrow MOH^*$), while the other is associated with oxygen deprotonation (Step B: $MOH^* \rightarrow MO$). This indicates a dependence on the surface coverage phase of M (step A), which requires high energy to form a new bond with oxygen. Step A, the rate-determining step is followed by favorable deprotonation (Step B). [102,103] Based on the similar values of Tafel slopes of NiFe-PBA and NiFeP-PBA, P-functionalization did not alter the OER mechanism, which

resulted in the same for NiFe-PBA and NiFeP-PBA.

The gravimetric capacitance of the two materials was calculated from the cyclic voltammograms shown in Fig. S4, according to Eq. (2), resulting 7.12 mF mg⁻¹ and 5.12 mF mg⁻¹ for NiFeP-PBA and NiFe-PBA, respectively. Considering a value of 0.04 mFcm⁻², ECSA resulted 17.8 m² g⁻¹ and 13.0 m² g⁻¹ for NiFeP-PBA and NiFe-PBA respectively. Those values are in agreement with other previously reported works dealing with similar materials.[109,110] The slightly higher ECSA of NiFeP-PBA than NiFe-PBA is coherent with the improved electrochemical activity of the P-functionalized sample. The Nyquist plots obtained by EIS and shown in Fig. S5 also confirm this trend. The first semicircle at higher frequencies is associated with electron transfer phenomena, as in the case of IrO₂, the second semicircle is associated with mass transfer of OH⁻, OOH⁻ functional species for the OER reaction.[111–113] P-functionalization allows for reducing both charge-transfer and mass-transfer resistances; this is also reflected in the higher faradic efficiency (ϵ) of NiFeP-PBA than NiFe-PBA. ϵ was evaluated by chronoamperometry (Fig. S6), being $\epsilon = 83$ % for NiFeP-PBA and $\epsilon = 42$ % NiFe-PBA.

Half-cell durability tests, shown in Fig. 4c, were performed by chronopotentiometry at 10 mA cm⁻² under dynamic conditions (1600 rpm).[89] During the first two hours, η at 10 mA cm⁻² (η_{J10}) decreases for both samples (~ 23 % for NiFe-PBA and ~ 17 % for NiFeP-PBA) followed by an increase after 6 h for NiFe-PBA, while for NiFeP-PBA η_{J10} is maintained stable with only a slight increase after 10 h. The initial decrease can be attributed to the activation of the catalyst surface, which enhances the electrochemical kinetics as active sites become available. This phenomenon is often observed in the early stages of testing, where forming a thin layer of oxides or oxyhydroxides on the catalyst surface

increases catalytic activity. [114] As the test progresses, steady behavior indicates the active sites' stabilization, followed by only a slight increase after 6 h for NiFe-PBA and 10 h for NiFeP-PBA. By contrast, the rapid and immediate increase in overpotential in the case of IrO₂ indicates a significant material degradation in agreement with the literature. [79,80]

Fig. 4d shows a literature comparison of OER overpotential (η) at different current densities (10, 50, 100 mA cm⁻²) with that of NiFeP-PBA reported in this work. In the literature landscape about OER electrocatalysts for AEMWEs, we can observe how the NiFeP-PBA catalyst is well-positioned regarding OER overpotential and electrocatalytic activity.

Based on the competitive electrochemical performance of NiFeP-PBA and NiFe-PBA, the catalysts were assembled at the anode of the AEMWE equipped with commercial Pt/C (40 wt. %) at the cathode of the single cell equipment, and a FAA3-50 Fumasep®. Schematics of AEMWE assembly is shown in Fig. 5a.

Fig. 5b shows the polarization curves for NiFeP-PBA, NiFe-PBA, and IrO₂. The resulting trend is similar to those obtained in the half-cell tests. In fact, at 1.8 V, the NiFeP-PBA sample achieves a current density of 0.40 A cm⁻², while the current density for the MEAs equipped with NiFe-PBA and IrO₂ anode catalysts are 0.26 and 0.22 A cm⁻², respectively. In agreement with the Nyquist plots acquired in a half-cell configuration previously discussed in Fig. S5, the NiFeP-PBA exhibits polarization lower resistance (0.63 Ω cm²) than NiFe-PBA (1.8 Ω cm²), as highlighted by Nyquist plots obtained by EIS analysis under AEMWE operation (Fig. S7).

Fig. 5c shows the polarization curves of the NiFeP-PBA using different KOH concentrations (0.1 to 1 M). When KOH concentration is decreased, there is only a moderate decrease in electrochemical performance: the current density at 1.8 V decreased only about 40 % when the electrolyte concentration decreased by one order of magnitude.

Therefore, a KOH concentration of 0.1 M was selected for further tests.

Table 2 reports a comparison of the electrochemical performance of NiFeP-PBA at the anode of an AEMWE with those previously obtained in literature for similar Ni-based electrocatalysts. This comparison highlights that the electrochemical performance of NiFeP-PBA prepared in this work is well aligned with previously published results, enabling high electrochemical performance at low electrolyte concentration.

Changes in morphology and structure of NiFeP-PBA and NiFe-PBA were evaluated after 1 h of AEMWE operation at 1.8 V with 0.1 M KOH. The anode catalysts were partially recovered and subjected to SEM and HAADF-STEM analyses (Fig. 6). The relative weight percent of O, P, Ni, and Fe as obtained from EDS analysis is also reported in Fig. 6 as pie and bar charts. After assembling the NiFe-PBA and NiFeP-PBA in MEAs, the material's morphology differs from that shown in Fig. 1. This is due to the residual ionomer's presence and the morphological changes induced by MEA preparation conditions (ink's sonication, hot pressing, and oxidative stress at 60 °C). [123–126]

Overall, SEM images show that all samples exhibit needle-like structures homogeneously dispersed in the material (Fig. 6a-b). HAADF-STEM images show that the NiFeP-PBA (Fig. 6c) has the most pronounced needle presence compared with NiFe-PBA (1 h) (Fig. 6d). The EDS analysis reveals that the needle-like structures can be ascribed to Ni phases, as seen in zones A (Fig. 6c) and B and C (Fig. 6d). In addition, iron aggregates (~30-40 nm) were observed. These iron phases are attributable to iron oxide nanoparticles formed during OER activity of the catalyst in contact with the electrolyte, as proposed by Schlögl et al. [126] Interestingly, EDS analysis of SEM images indicated that the 3:2 Ni:Fe weight ratio is maintained after assembling the catalysts in the MEA, and the P presence can be detected in the NiFeP-PBA sample.

The NiFeP-PBA sample was subjected to further long-term durability tests, recording current density at 1.8 V over 100 h (Fig. 7a).

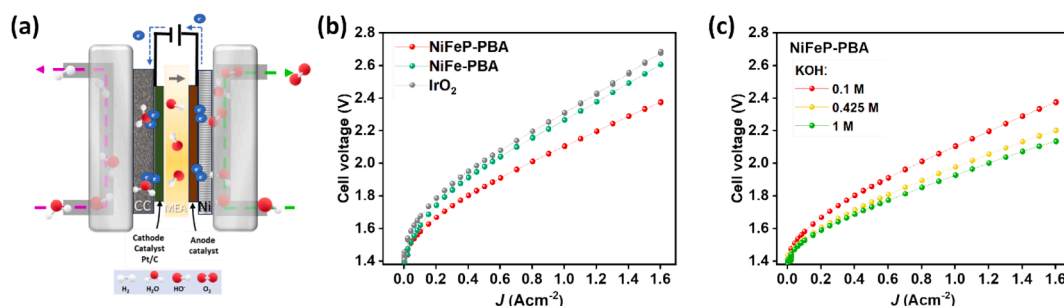


Fig. 5. (a) Schematics of an AEMWE assembly, (b) Polarization curves of NiFeP-PBA, NiFe-PBA, and IrO₂ samples (0.1 M KOH), (c) polarization curves of NiFeP-PBA at different KOH concentrations (0.1–1.0 M).

Table 2

Comparison of current density values obtained in this work and in the literature for AEMWEs equipped with PGM-free OER catalysts at the anodes.

AEM	Anode/Cathode (loading) catalysts	[KOH] (M)	J (A cm ⁻²) @1.8 V	J (A cm ⁻²) @2 V	T (°C)	Ref.
FAA-3-50	IrO ₂ (1.6 mg cm ⁻²) / Pt/C(40 %) (0.23 mg cm ⁻²)	0.1	0.22	0.79	60	This work
FAA-3-50	NiFe-PBA (2 mg cm ⁻²) / Pt/C(40 %) (0.23 mg cm ⁻²)	0.1	0.26	0.54	60	This work
FAA-3-50	NiFeP-PBA (1.9 mg cm ⁻²) / Pt/C(40 %) (0.23 mg cm ⁻²)	0.1	0.40	0.47	60	This work
FAA-3-50	NiFeP-PBA (1.9 mg cm ⁻²) / Pt/C(40 %) (0.23 mg cm ⁻²)	0.425	0.59	1.06	60	This work
FAA-3-50	NiFeP-PBA (1.9 mg cm ⁻²) / Pt/C(40 %) (0.23 mg cm ⁻²)	1	0.67	1.21	60	This work
FAA-3-50	NiFe ₂ O ₄ (1.8 mg cm ⁻²) / NiFeCo (2.7 mg cm ⁻²)	1	0.24		60	[115]
SustainionGrade T	NiFe ₂ O ₄ (1.8 mg cm ⁻²) / Raney nickel (14.8 mg cm ⁻²)	1	0.84		60	[115]
FAA-3-50	NiFeOOH (0.5 mg cm ⁻²) / Pt/C (0.4 mg cm ⁻²)	1		3.6 @1.9 V	70	[116]
FAA3-50	NiFeOx (3 mg cm ⁻²) / Pt/C (0.5 mg cm ⁻²)	1	1.5	2.4	60	[117]
FAA3-50	NiFe ₂ O ₄ (2 mg cm ⁻²) / NiFeCo (2 mg cm ⁻²)	1	0.38		60	[118]
FAS-50	NiFe ₂ O ₄ (1.8 mg cm ⁻²) / NiFeCo (2.7 mg cm ⁻²)	1	0.24		60	[118]
FAA3-50	g-CN-CNF-800 (6 mg cm ⁻²) / Pt/C(40 %) (0.4 mg cm ⁻²)	1		0.73@1.9 V	60	[119]
FAA3-50	NiMn ₂ O ₄ (3 mg cm ⁻²) / (0.5 mg cm ⁻²)	1		0.530	80	[120]
FAA3-50	NiMn ₂ O ₄ / CNF (2.5 mg cm ⁻²) / Pt/C(40 %) (0.5 mg cm ⁻²)	6	0.18		60	[121]
FAA3-50	NiCo ₂ O ₄ /CNF(3 mg cm ⁻²) / Pt/C(40 %) (0.5 mg cm ⁻²)	6	0.30		60	[121]
Sustanion	NiFe ₂ O ₄ / NiFeCo	1		1.6	60	[122]

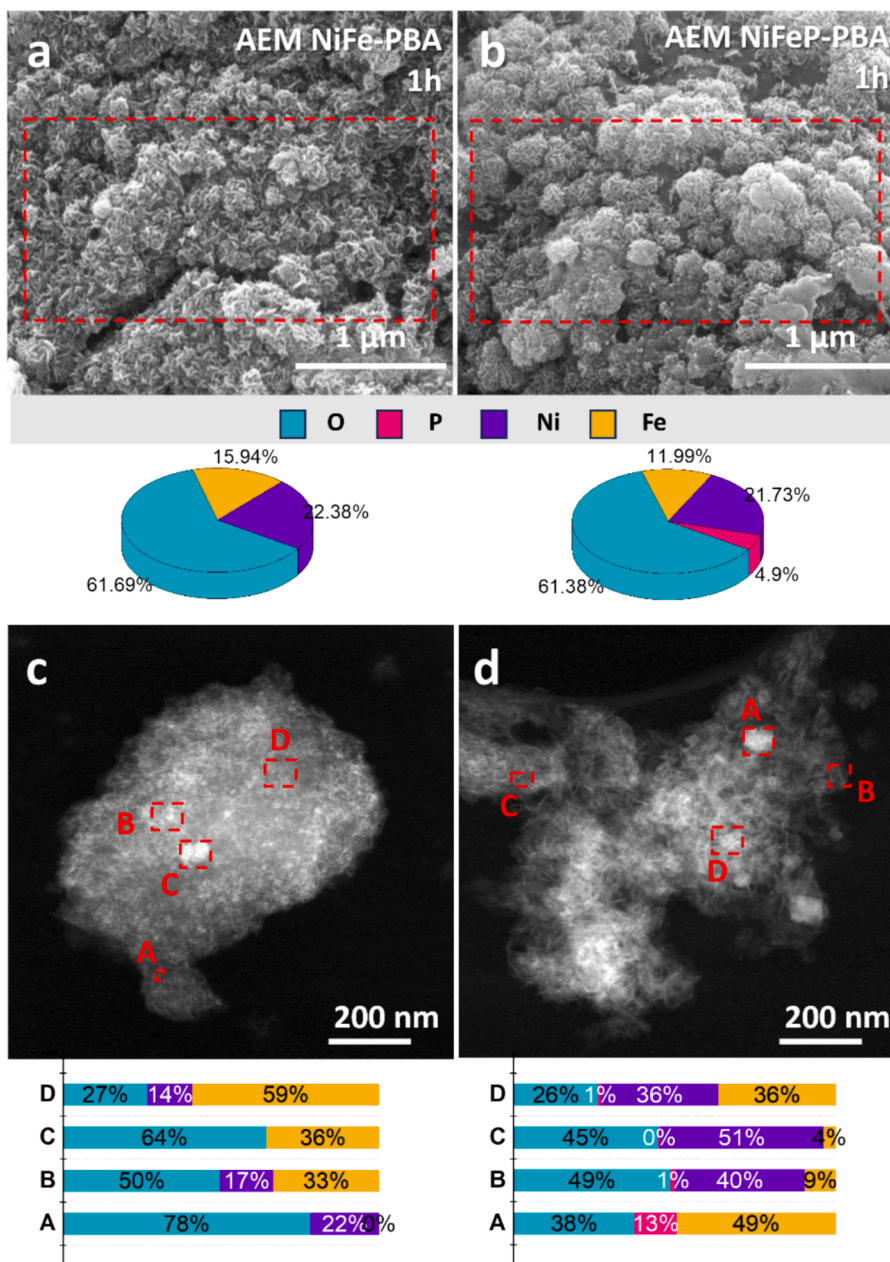


Fig. 6. SEM images of (a) NiFe-PBA, (b) NiFeP-PBA, and HAADF-STEM images of (c) NiFe-PBA, and (d) NiFeP-PBA after 1 h AEMWE operation with the corresponding element atomic percentage.

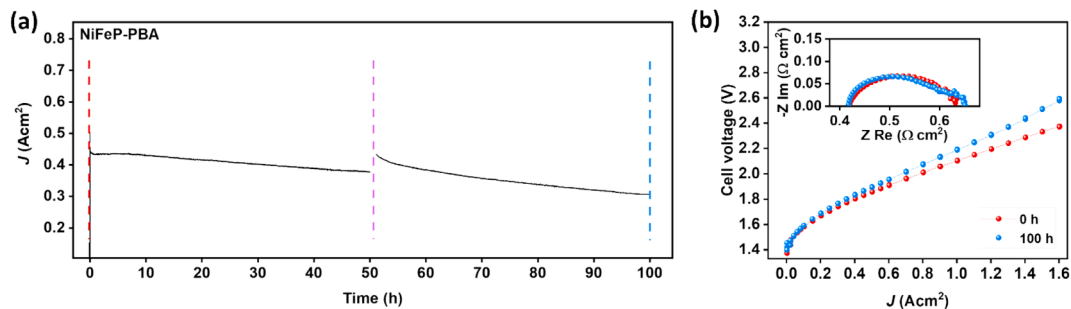


Fig. 7. (a) Durability test: $J@1.8$ V over time for NiFeP-PBA, and (b) the corresponding polarization curves and EIS spectra at 1.5 V (inset) before (0 h) and after (100 h) the durability test.

The current density loss is about 12 % after 50 h and 28 % after 100 h. The loss of performance over time has also been observed in similar systems, and this is not explicitly related to the anode catalyst itself but to the system as a whole. [127] Some major critical factors are related to the membrane used (in this case FAA-3–50 Fumasep®), [118] the ionomer binding agent, [128,129] pH, [130,131] electrolyte transport issues, [132] and other factors specific to the setup itself. [125] In fact, replacing the electrolyte with a fresh electrolyte after 50 h operation, which is a standard practice in AEMWE testing [125,133], positively influenced the test performance, which significantly improved (about 10 %) after the electrolyte change. This aspect indicates a partial reversible degradation associated with the system, particularly the electrolyte composition.

Polarization curves and EIS spectra were acquired before and after the durability test (Fig. 7b), resulting in only an 8 % increase in total polarization resistance, which allows for retaining up to 88 % current density at 1.8 V after 100 h of AEMWE working, which can be considered as a promising and competitive result as compared to previous published papers. [134,135] Therefore, NiFeP-PBA has demonstrated a high OER activity in an alkaline environment, resulting in a good performance in delivered current density and stability once assembled at the anode of an AEMWE.

4. Conclusion

Mild aqueous precipitation of iron and nickel PBA analogues followed by thermal stabilization in an inert gas atmosphere is a facile and efficient strategy for preparing NiFe-PBA OER catalysts in AEMWE applications. As highlighted by SEM, TEM, XRD, and XPS analysis, the thermal stabilization step enabled obtaining NiFe-based OER active sites distributed as Fe₃O₄, NiFe₂O₄, and metal nickel, preserving the nano cubic morphology of the Ni[Fe(CN)₆]_{2/3} precursor structure. Implementing the thermal treatment step with sodium hypophosphite allowed P-functionalization and the formation of NiFeP-based active sites to boost OER activity further. The electrochemical performances, evaluated by LSV-RDE and chronopotentiometry experiments in a half-cell configuration in 1 M KOH electrolyte, indicated E_{J10} of 1.47 V for NiFeP-PBA and 1.52 V vs. RHE for NiFe-PBA, with good performance stability over time. These values surpassed the IrO₂ performance used as a benchmark (E_{J10} = 1.61 V vs. RHE, huge stability loss).

Polarization curves obtained in the AEMWE (fuel-cell configuration) reflected the same trend observed in the half-cell, and the NiFeP-PBA sample delivered a current density of 1.21 A cm⁻² at 2 V (1 M KOH). The electrochemical results were complemented by SEM and HAADF-STEM of the NiFe-PBA-based samples after AEMWE operation, suggesting a crucial role of PBA as catalyst precursor, thermal stabilization, and P-doping in enhancing the electrocatalyst activity and stability of the catalysts. The NiFeP-PBA, in addition to having better-performing polarization curves than NiFe-PBA, showed promising results in terms of stability by maintaining 88 % of the current density at 1.8 V after 100 h of operation in the AEMWE.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Beatrice Ricciardi: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation. **Williane da Silva Freitas:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation. **Barbara Mecheri:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **José Manuel Luque-Centeno:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Data curation. **Cinthia Alegre:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation. **David Sebastián:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Resources, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation. **María Jesús Lázaro:** Project

administration, Funding acquisition. **Alessandra D'Epifanio:** Writing – review & editing, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cej.2024.156256>.

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