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Article

Multipass Nanofiltration for Lithium Separation with High Selectivity and Recovery

Ruoyu Wang, Rayan Alghanayem, and Shihong Lin*

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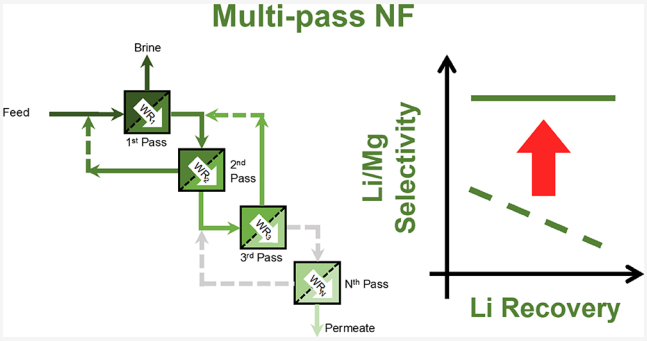
ABSTRACT: Nanofiltration (NF) is a promising and sustainable process to extract Li^+ from brine lakes with high Mg^{2+}/Li^+ mass ratios. However, a trade-off between Li/Mg selectivity and Li recovery exists at the process scale, and the Li/Mg selectivity of commercially and lab-made NF membranes in a single-pass NF process is insufficient to achieve the industrially required Li purity. To overcome this challenge, we propose a multipass NF process with brine recirculation to achieve high selectivity without sacrificing Li recovery. We experimentally demonstrate that Li/Mg selectivity of a three-pass NF process with a commercial NF membrane can exceed 1000, despite the compromised Li recovery as a result of co-existing cations. Our theoretical analysis further predicts that a four-pass NF process with brine recirculation can simultaneously achieve an ultrahigh Li/Mg selectivity of over 4500 and a Li recovery of over 95%. This proposed process could potentially facilitate efficient NF-based solute−solute separations of all kinds and contribute to the development of novel membrane-based separation technologies.



KEYWORDS: *nanofiltration, lithium extraction, selective separation, solute−solute separation*

■ INTRODUCTION

Lithium (Li) has become one of the most valuable resources in the 21st century with a sharp increase in demand as a result of its applications in batteries for electrifying transportation and sustainable energy storage.[1,2] Li^+ is abundant in salt lake brine, although at a relatively low concentration compared to other co-existing cations, especially magnesium (Mg), which often exists at a concentration 1−3 orders of magnitude higher than Li.[3] In a typical treatment train for Li extraction (from brine), Li^+ is recovered at the final precipitation step in the form of hydroxide or carbonate compounds. Because $Mg(OH)_2$ or $MgCO_3$ also has low solubility and will thus co-precipitate (with LiOH or Li_2CO_3), separating Li^+ from Mg^{2+} in previous steps is critical to achieving a final product with high purity. A conventional solar evaporation/precipitation-based Li extraction process requires a large footprint and substantial use of chemicals and cannot effectively handle brines with a high Mg^{2+}/Li^+ mass ratio (MLR).[2,4] Nanofiltration (NF), which can separate mono- and divalent ions, has been explored for Li/Mg separation as a result of its separation effectiveness, modularity, and process sustainability.[5] Because direct lithium extraction is challenging for NF as a result of the high ionic strength, complex feed composition, and high scaling potential, NF is typically integrated with other pre- and post-treatment unit processes to assemble a complete treatment train. Sodium and potassium precipitation (e.g., KCl fertilizer production) and Li-selective adsorption are typical pretreatment units preceding NF, during which Li is pre-enriched from the original brine lakes. Reverse osmosis can be applied as a post-treatment to concentrate the Li-enriched stream from the NF permeate for the final precipitation step and recover the water for next-cycle dilution of brine before it enters the NF process.

NF membranes have sub-nanometer pores and charged functional groups that allow them to selectively exclude ions by steric, dielectric, Donnan exclusion, and dehydration mechanisms. The selectivity of mono- and divalent ions stems from the difference in the ion size, valence, and mobility. The Li/Mg selectivity of most commercial and lab-made NF membranes is typically lower than 30, with some exceptional membranes achieving 80−100.[6−12] Such a selectivity corresponds to a Li purity (i.e., mass ratio of Li over the sum of Li and Mg in the permeate) of 10−90% when treating a typical brine with high MLR (e.g., 10−120) in a single pass of filtration, which fails to meet the industrial requirements of Li product purity (e.g., 98−99.9%) without additional chemical purification.

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While the intrinsic ability of the membrane to separate Li^+ and Mg^{2+} may be substantially improved with a better design of membrane material and structure (e.g., incorporating coordination chemistry),[7,12−15] an operational trade-off always exists at the process scale between the two success criteria for Li extraction in a single-pass NF process: Li/Mg selectivity and Li recovery.[16] Specifically, selectivity inevitably decreases as more Li^+ is recovered.[16] Therefore, innovation and optimization of the current NF-based Li/Mg separation process are necessary to improve both Li/Mg selectivity (i.e., product purity) and Li recovery simultaneously, regardless of the intrinsic membrane performance.

Multipass filtration is an effective strategy to improve water purity in water treatment processes.[17] Two- or even three-pass reverse osmosis has been adopted in seawater desalination and wastewater purification because the feed streams contain small and neutral compounds (e.g., boron and some micropollutants) that cannot be sufficiently rejected in a single pass.[18,19] Similarly, a multipass NF process, where the permeate in each pass is repressurized to feed into the next pass (Figure 1), is hypothesized to achieve higher Li/Mg selectivity by rejecting the less permeable ion, Mg^{2+}, multiple times. A similar approach has been employed in selective electrodialysis for Li/Mg separation. A four-stage electrodialysis module was validated experimentally to enhance the Li/Mg selectivity by orders of magnitude.[20]

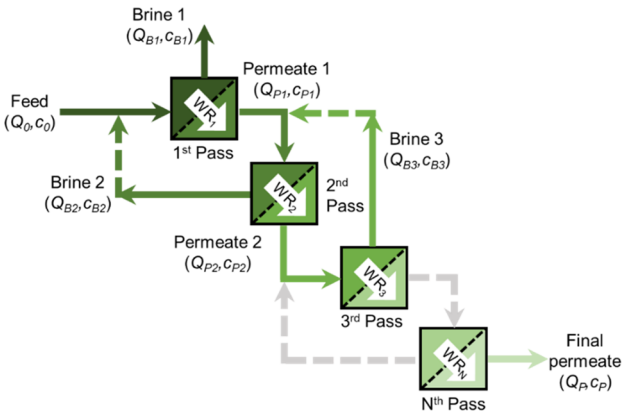

Figure 1. Schematics of the multipass NF process for Li/Mg separation. The permeate of the Nth pass is the feed of the $(N + 1)$th pass. The brine of the Nth pass recirculates back to the feed of the $(N - 1)$th pass. Each pass can be operated at different pressures and water recovery. Passes between the 3rd and Nth passes and pumps for pressurizing streams and recirculation are omitted for simplicity.

However, the overall Li recovery can be compromised in a multipass NF process if the brines are disposed directly after each filtration pass, because achieving 100% water recovery or Li recovery is unlikely in any single pass. To address this issue, the brine of each pass beyond the first pass may cycle back to the previous pass to be part of its feed solution (dashed arrows in Figure 1). With recirculation, the multipass process has only one main brine stream from the first pass and one main permeate stream (i.e., product stream) from the last pass, thereby mitigating the loss of Li^+ in the process.

In this study, we first conduct experiments to evaluate the Li/Mg separation performance of a three-pass NF process without brine recirculation under varying operating pressures using a simple Li/Mg mixture as the feed solution. We then investigate the impacts of co-existing cations and anions on Li/Mg selectivity and Li recovery of the multipass process. Finally, we extend the analysis to predicting the performance of multipass Li/Mg separation with brine recirculation by applying a module-scale NF model.

■ MATERIALS AND METHODS

Experiments of Multipass NF without Brine Recirculation. Multipass Li/Mg NF separation experiments without brine recirculation were carried out using a commercial spiral-wound NF membrane module with a polyamide membrane, NFX-1812 (Synder Filtration, Vacaville, CA, U.S.A.; Table S1 of the Supporting Information), in a crossflow filtration system. The NFX membrane was selected in this study over other more commonly seen commercial NF membranes (e.g., NF270 and NF90 from Dupont) because the NFX membrane is closer to the upper bound in the material trade-off plot (Li/Mg permeability ratio versus Li/water permeability ratio),[16] which suggests that NFX has potential to achieve moderate purity and Li recovery at the same time. The effective membrane area of the module is 0.37 m^2. Pure water permeability was first measured after pre-compaction of the membrane. Li/Mg separation was then conducted with synthetic brines at different pressures in batch mode, i.e., circulating the brine stream back to the feed tank and collecting the permeate stream in a separate tank until the target water recovery was achieved. The target water recovery was set as 75% for the first pass (unless otherwise stated) to avoid a very low water flux at higher water recovery, because a low flux requires more membrane area in the real process to achieve the same target water recovery. The target water recovery was set as 85% for the second and third passes (unless otherwise stated), which was possible because the osmotic pressures for the second and third passes were much lower than those of the first pass. The determination of water recovery considers the solution dead volume in the membrane module and in the crossflow filtration loop. A balance was used to monitor the mass increase of the permeate tank over time for water recovery estimation. In the batch mode where the water recovery of the small membrane coupon in each pass is negligible, the spatial variation of the feed concentration in a real membrane module is mimicked by the temporal variation of the feed concentration in the feed tank.

We focus the application scenario of NF on treating "old brines" (i.e., the brine after K and Na precipitation) or the elution solutions after a Li-selective adsorption pretreatment step. Specifically, a simple mixture of 3.4 mM LiCl and 19.6 mM $MgCl_2$ was first used as the initial feed solution to evaluate multipass separation performance. The concentrations of Li^+ (23.8 mg L^{-1}) and Mg^{2+} (470.4 mg L^{-1}) represent a diluted brine with a MLR of 20. We note that the dilution of feed solution is typically necessary for two reasons: (1) to reduce the osmotic pressure, so that a relatively low operating pressure can be used, and (2) to reduce the charge screening effect, so that the Donnan effect can be leveraged for the selective separation of mono- and divalent cations. We also note that the fresh water used for dilution can be recouped in the subsequent reverse osmosis post-treatment for concentrating the NF permeate. The determination of the optimal dilution factor is beyond the scope of this study and requires more comprehensive analysis to account for separation performance, process cost, and availability of fresh water to initiate the process.

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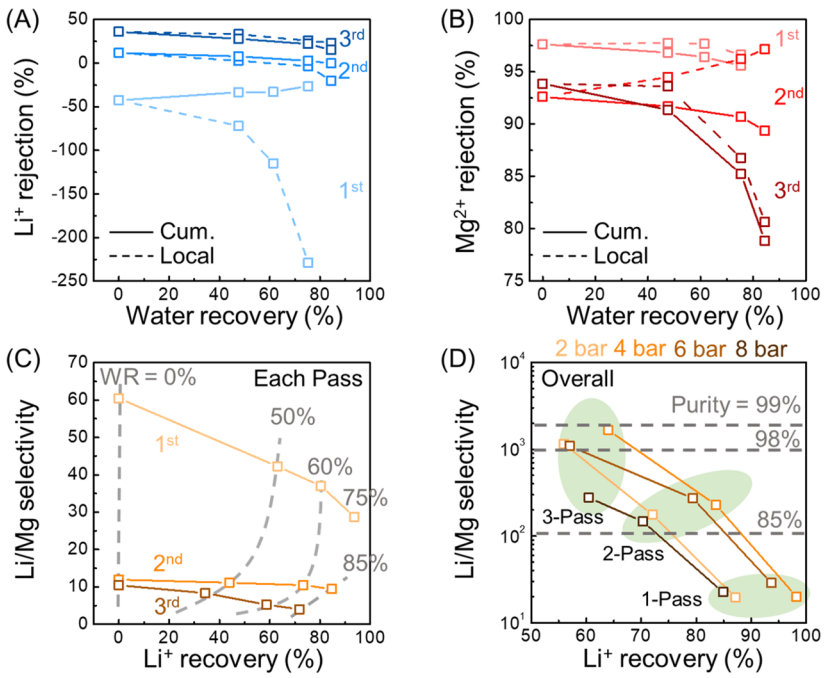

Figure 2. Performance of a three-pass Li/Mg separation process without brine recirculation. (A and B) Local and cumulative (A) Li^+ rejection and (B) Mg^{2+} rejection as a function of water recovery in each pass. (C) Li/Mg selectivity versus Li recovery in each pass. The pressure in panels A−C was 6 bar. (D) Overall Li/Mg selectivity and Li recovery variation with the number of passes using different pressures. Feed solution was the simple $LiCl/MgCl_2$ mixture. Water recovery was 75% for the first pass and 85% for the rest.

Two more complex and practical brine compositions (Table S2 of the Supporting Information) were then tested to study the impacts of co-existing cations and anions on the multipass Li/Mg separation. Feed and permeate solutions were sampled at different water recovery values with a sampling volume of 1 mL per sample. The permeate flowing out of the spiral-wound module (before entering the permeate tank) and the permeate in the permeate tank (where the permeate effluent mixes with existing solution in the tank) were sampled separately and were referred to as the "local permeate" and "cumulative permeate", respectively. Cation concentrations of the collected samples were measured by inductively coupled plasma optical emission spectroscopy. Anion concentrations were measured via ion chromatography. For multipass filtration experiments without recirculation, each pass was conducted sequentially, with the permeate composition used as the feed composition for the next pass.

The local permeate flux, J_w, at different water recoveries was determined using the following equation:

$$J_w = \frac{\Delta m}{A\Delta t} \tag{1}$$

where Δm is the permeate tank mass change in a short time interval of Δt and A is the effective filtration area of the membrane module. The observed local ion rejection at a certain water recovery (WR), $R_i^{loc}(\mathrm{WR})$, was calcualted as

$$R_i^{loc}(\mathrm{WR}) = 1 - \frac{c_{p,i}^{loc}(\mathrm{WR})}{c_{b,i}(\mathrm{WR})} \tag{2}$$

where $c_{p,i}^{loc}$ and $c_{b,i}$ are concentrations of the target ion in the local permeate (sampled at the outlet of the permeate tube) and brine (also known as retentate), respectively. While the cumulative ion rejection, R_i^{cum}, was calcualted as

$$R_i^{cum}(\mathrm{WR}) = 1 - \frac{c_{p,i}^{cum}(\mathrm{WR})}{c_{f,i}} \tag{3}$$

where $c_{p,i}^{cum}$ is the concentration of the target ion in the cumulative permeate (sampled in the permeate tank) and $c_{f,i}$ is the initial feed concentration of the current pass. The cumulative Li/Mg selectivity or separation factor, $S_{Li/Mg}$, is defined as[21]

$$S_{Li/Mg} \equiv \frac{1 - R_{Li}^{cum}}{1 - R_{Mg}^{cum}} \tag{4}$$

Li purity (η_{Li}) is related to the MLR of the feed solution and the Li/Mg selectivity via the following equation:

$$\eta_{Li} = \frac{1}{1 + \mathrm{MLR}/S_{Li/Mg}} \tag{5}$$

Li recovery (LiR), defined as the mass fraction of Li^+ in the feed that is eventually recovered in the permeate, can be quantified by

$$\mathrm{LiR} = \mathrm{WR}(1 - R_{Li}^{cum}) \tag{6}$$

We note that $S_{Li/Mg}$ (or η_{Li}) and LiR are both important performance metrics, and a successful Li/Mg separation must achieve high $S_{Li/Mg}$ and LiR simultaneously.[16]

Modeling Multipass NF with Brine Recirculation. To validate multipass NF without brine recirculation, each filtration pass was conducted separately using a benchtop filtration system in the batch mode, as described in the previous section. However, for the validation of multipass NF with brine recirculation, a pilot-scale system is required, where a high value of water recovery can be achieved in a single pass, and the brine from each pass is recirculated to the feed of the previous pass to achieve steady-state operation. Therefore, in

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this study (without access to a pilot-scale system), the performance of multipass NF with brine recirculation was simulated using a modeling approach.

A module-scale NF model for mixture solutions was applied to evaluate the Li/Mg separation performance of the multipass NF process, in which the local mass transport across the membrane was described by the solution diffusion electromigration model (SDEM), as described in Text S1 of the Supporting Information.[22−24] For multipass filtration without brine recirculation, each pass can be solved sequentially with the permeate composition of one pass used as the feed to the next pass. For multipass filtration with brine recirculation, the feed of each pass between the first and last pass (i.e., second to $(N-1)$th pass) is a mixture of the permeate from the previous pass and the brine from the next pass (Figure 1). When steady-state operation is achieved, the mass balance of water can be described as

$$Q_n = \begin{cases} Q_0 + Q_2(1 - \mathrm{WR}_2), & \text{for } n = 1 \\ Q_{n-1}\mathrm{WR}_{n-1} + Q_{n+1}(1 - \mathrm{WR}_{n+1}), & \text{for } n = 2 \sim N-1 \\ Q_{n-1}\mathrm{WR}_{n-1}, & \text{for } n = N \end{cases} \tag{7}$$

where N is the number of passes, Q_n and WR_n are the feed flow rate and water recovery of pass n, respectively, and Q_0 is the initial feed flow rate. Q_n is a function of Q_0 and the water recovery of each pass and can be solved analytically. The mass balance of ions can be described as

$$c_{\mathrm{f},n} = \begin{cases} Q_0 c_0 + Q_2(1 - \mathrm{WR}_2)c_{\mathrm{b},2}, & \text{for } n = 1 \\ Q_{n-1}\mathrm{WR}_{n-1}c_{\mathrm{p},n-1} + Q_{n+1}(1 - \mathrm{WR}_{n+1})c_{\mathrm{b},n+1}, & \text{for } n = 2 \sim N-1 \\ c_{\mathrm{p},n-1}, & \text{for } n = N \end{cases} \tag{8}$$

where $c_{\mathrm{f},n}$, $c_{\mathrm{p},n}$, and $c_{\mathrm{b},n}$ are feed, permeate, and brine concentrations of pass n, respectively. $c_{\mathrm{f},n}$ depends upon both $c_{\mathrm{p},n-1}$ and $c_{\mathrm{b},n+1}$ and is thus solved iteratively until a steady state is found. The module-scale NF model was first validated by comparing predictions to the experimental results of multipass NF without recirculation. The analysis was then extended to the multipass system with recirculation for different numbers of passes.

■ RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Trade-off between Selectivity and Recovery in Multipass Li/Mg Separation without Brine Recirculation. The Li/Mg separation performance of a three-pass NF process without recirculation was first tested with the simple Li/Mg feed without other cation species. Both cumulative and local Li^+ rejections increase with the number of passes, while Mg^{2+} rejections decrease (panels A and B of Figure 2). Negative rejection of Li^+ is common in NF with mixed-salt feed solution as a result of maintaining the Donnan equilibrium when the feed solution is abundant in strongly rejected Mg^{2+}, while Cl^- can easily permeate through the membrane.[24−26] The permeation of Cl^- promotes the transport of Li^+ to maintain charge neutrality in the permeate. The local Li^+ rejection in the first pass can be strongly negative when water recovery increases (Figure 2A), mainly as a result of both the increasing local MLR and decreasing local water flux (Figure S1 of the Supporting Information) because the driving force diminishes with the increasing brine osmotic pressure. Li^+ rejection becomes positive in the second pass and further increases in the third pass, because most Mg^{2+} is rejected in the first pass. The MLR of the feed solution (which is the permeate of the last pass, except for the first pass) drops by an order of magnitude after each pass (Figure S2 of the Supporting Information).

The NFX membrane has slightly negative charges near neutral pH (e.g., isoelectric point around pH 5). A recent study has shown that the adsorption of multivalent cations (e.g., Mg^{2+}) to carboxylic functional groups may lead to charge reversal; i.e., the membrane may become positively charged,[27] which, in turn, benefits the rejection of Mg^{2+} and, thus, increases Li/Mg selectivity. With substantially reduced Mg^{2+} concentrations in feed solutions of the second and third passes (Figure S2 of the Supporting Information), the charge reversal effect may be weakened and, thus, the membrane becomes less positively charged, which is a possible explanation of the reduced Mg^{2+} rejection in later passes. Another possibility is that the Mg^{2+} adsorption is not enough to cause charge reversal, so that the membrane remains negatively charged in later passes. The enhanced Donnan effect as a result of the reduced feed ionic strength in later passes leads to reduced Mg^{2+} rejection.

Li/Mg selectivity is sensitive to Mg^{2+} rejection as a result of how selectivity is defined on the basis of eq 4, especially when Mg^{2+} is well-rejected (e.g., $R_{\mathrm{Mg}} > 95\%$). Thus, the trade-off between Li/Mg selectivity and Li recovery is most obvious in the first pass where the selectivity drops from 60 to less than 30 as Li recovery increases from 0 to over 90% (Figure 2C). The trade-off still exists in the second and third passes, although Li/Mg selectivity becomes less sensitive to Li recovery (Figure 2C). The selectivity for the second and third passes (<15) is much lower than that of the first pass as a result of the reduced Mg^{2+} rejection and increased Li^+ rejection caused by roughly an order of magnitude reduction in MLR following each pass. In other words, we can achieve high Li recovery in second and third passes without sacrificing too much selectivity in the same pass, even though the selectivity is relatively low compared to that of the first pass.

The trade-off between selectivity and recovery is affected by the applied pressure or permeate flux (Figure S3 of the Supporting Information). Although a higher pressure allows for the achievement of a higher water recovery, especially in the first pass, where the osmotic pressure increases rapidly at a high water recovery, the higher water flux resulting from a higher operating pressure can be detrimental to Li recovery: if water permeation is much faster than Li^+ permeation, only a small fraction of Li^+ in the feed solution can be recovered in the permeate.[16]

According to our recent work, the operating pressure also has a non-monotonic impact on the Li/Mg selectivity.[16] The lower selectivity in the low-pressure range is due to the weakened "dilution effect": the low water flux reduces the Mg^{2+} rejection, to which the Li/Mg selectivity is very sensitive. The lower selectivity in the high-pressure range is a result of enhanced concentration polarization (CP), which increases the MLR at the membrane interface. The optimal pressure or water flux for optimal Li/Mg selectivity depends upon both the membrane properties and feed solution composition (and was 4 bar in our case based on the results shown in Figure 2D).

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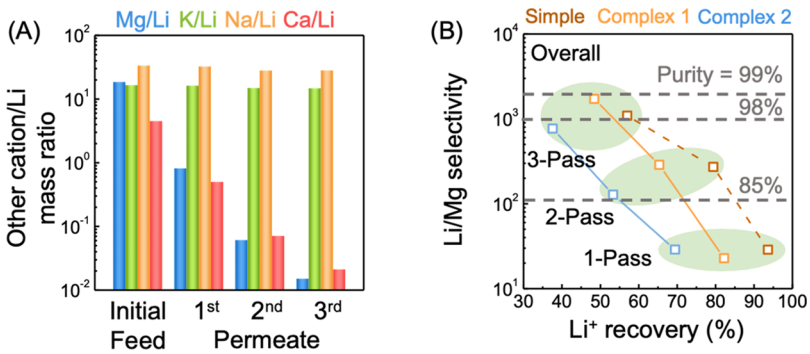

Figure 3. Impacts of co-existing cations and anions on the performance of a three-pass Li/Mg separation process. (A) Mass ratio of co-existing cations to Li^+ in the feed and permeate of each pass. Results of complex feed 1 (chloride as the only anion) are presented. (B) Overall Li/Mg selectivity and Li recovery variation with the number of passes for simple and complex feed solutions. Complex 1 is sulfate-free, and complex 2 contains sulfate. Water recovery was 75% for the first pass and 85% for the rest. The pressure was 6 bar.

Overall, the Li/Mg selectivity exceeds 100 with the two passes for all tested pressure and can even exceed 1000−2000 (equivalent to a purity of 98−99%) with three passes, except when 8 bar was applied (Figure 2D). However, the cumulative loss of Li recovery (∼40%) is also substantially higher than the single-pass process, which may be mitigated by recovering more water in each pass and introducing the brine recirculation strategy.

Impacts of Co-existing Cations and Anions on Multipass Li/Mg Separation. Real salt lake brines are complex multicomponent solutions with high salinities containing a variety of cations (e.g., Li^+, Mg^{2+}, Ca^{2+}, K^+, Na^+, etc.), in contrast to the simple dual-cation feed solution with only LiCl and $MgCl_2$, as used in most prior studies. The presence of Ca^{2+} in the permeate of the NF process would directly deteriorate the product purity because $CaCO_3$ is insoluble. While the presence of K^+ and Na^+ is less harmful to Li purity, it can still compromise Li recovery as a result of competitive transport in the NF process. Furthermore, the existence of other cations also changes the rejections of Li^+ and Mg^{2+} compared to those in a simple Li/Mg feed, ultimately impacting the Li/Mg selectivity and Li recovery. A mixture of LiCl, $MgCl_2$, $CaCl_2$, KCl, and NaCl (complex 1 in Table S2 of the Supporting Information) was tested as the feed to validate the effectiveness of multipass NF for enhancing Li/Mg selectivity in a more practical scenario. Mg^{2+} shows the highest rejections (85−95%), while Ca^{2+} rejection is lower but still over 80%. Na^+ and K^+ have rejections similar to Li^+ (Table S3 of the Supporting Information). Both Mg/Li and Ca/Li mass ratio drops by an order of magnitude after each pass, while the Na/Li and K/Li mass ratios remain almost unchanged over the three passes (Figure 3A). Therefore, the NFX membrane is effective to separate monovalent ions from divalent ions, but it shows no selectivity to monovalent cation pairs.

The impact of each co-existing cation (e.g., Ca^{2+}, K^+, and Na^+) on the Li/Mg selectivity has been investigated individually in the literature usually at the coupon-scale (i.e., zero water recovery)[28] but rarely tested in a mixture and with a high value of water recovery. The existence of Ca^{2+} is reported to increase Li/Mg selectivity,[28] because Ca^{2+} usually has a rejection similar to Mg^{2+}, which increases the divalent/monovalent cation ratio and, thus, forces Li^+ rejection to be more negative to balance the transport of Cl^-. Meanwhile, the existence of other monovalent cations, Na^+ or K^+, is reported to decrease Li/Mg selectivity,[28] because both Na^+ and K^+ have a smaller hydrated radius than Li^+ and, thus, are preferably transferred across the membrane with less hindrance in both interfacial partition and intrapore transport. When Ca^{2+}, K^+, and Na^+ co-exist in the feed mixture as chloride salts, their opposite individual impacts on Li/Mg selectivity offset each other to some extent, and thus, the observed overall Li/Mg selectivity after each pass is similar to or even higher than that measured with the simple Li/Mg feed (Figure 3B). The overall Li/Mg selectivity with complex feed 1 approaches 2000 (equivalent to 99% purity) after the third pass. However, Li recovery is further reduced when Ca^{2+}, K^+, and Na^+ co-exist, mainly as a result of the preferable transport of K^+ and Na^+ over Li^+. When SO_4^{2-} and Cl^- co-exist as anions (complex feed 2 in Table S2 of the Supporting Information), rejections of cations (especially monovalent cations) increased because the reduced total anion flux as SO_4^{2-} has lower permeance compared to Cl^-. As a result, both Li/Mg selectivity and Li recovery in the three-pass NF process were compromised in comparison to the case where SO_4^{2-} was absence (Figure 3B), consistent with a recent study showing that Li/Mg selectivity in coupon-scale experiments would be overestimated in the absence of SO_4^{2-}.[29] The Li-specific energy consumption (SEC_{Li}) of the three-pass NF process without brine recirculation is estimated for the simple feed (0.23 kWh mol^{-1}), complex feed 1 (0.30 kWh mol^{-1}), and complex feed 2 (0.42 kWh mol^{-1}), which increases as less Li is recovered (Table S4 of the Supporting Information).

High Selectivity and Recovery Achieved Simultaneously with Brine Recirculation. The Li/Mg separation performance of a four-pass NF process with brine recirculation was analyzed via module-scale modeling. The experimental validation of multipass NF with brine recirculation requires a pilot-scale system where a high value of water recovery can be achieved in a single pass and was thus not performed in this study as a result of the lack of access to pilot-test infrastructure. The local ion transport across the membrane in the module-scale NF model is characterized by the ion permeabilities in the SDEM model. Ion permeability depends upon both membrane properties and the solution composition. Experimental results of the three-pass filtration without recirculation were used to fit Li^+ and Mg^{2+} ion permeabilities under different pressures and water recovery values. Mg^{2+} permeability increases by over an order of magnitude over the three passes, corresponding to the rejection reduction from 95 to 80% in Figure 2B, while Li^+ permeability variation is less substantial (Table S5 of the Supporting Information). An empirical

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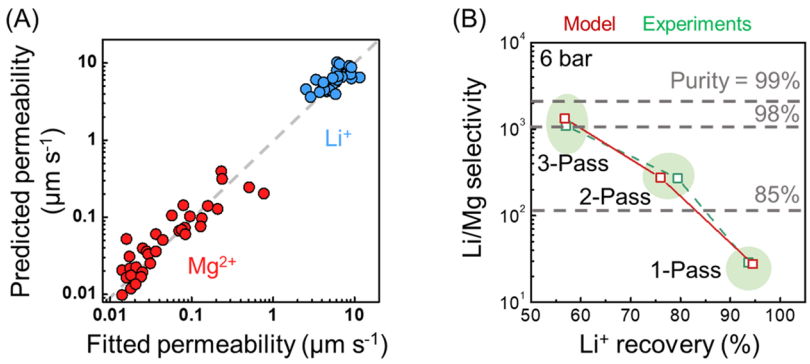

Figure 4. Modeling module-scale performance of Li/Mg separation by NF. (A) Correlation of predicted and fitted ion permeabilities. Fitted ion permeabilities are from three-pass filtration experiments without recirculation. (B) Validation of the module-scale model by comparing performance predictions of the three-pass filtration process to experimental results. The model used the same conditions as the experiments. Feed composition was 3.4 mM LiCl and 19.6 mM $MgCl_2$; water recovery was 75% for the first pass and 85% for the second and third passes; and the pressure was 6 bar.

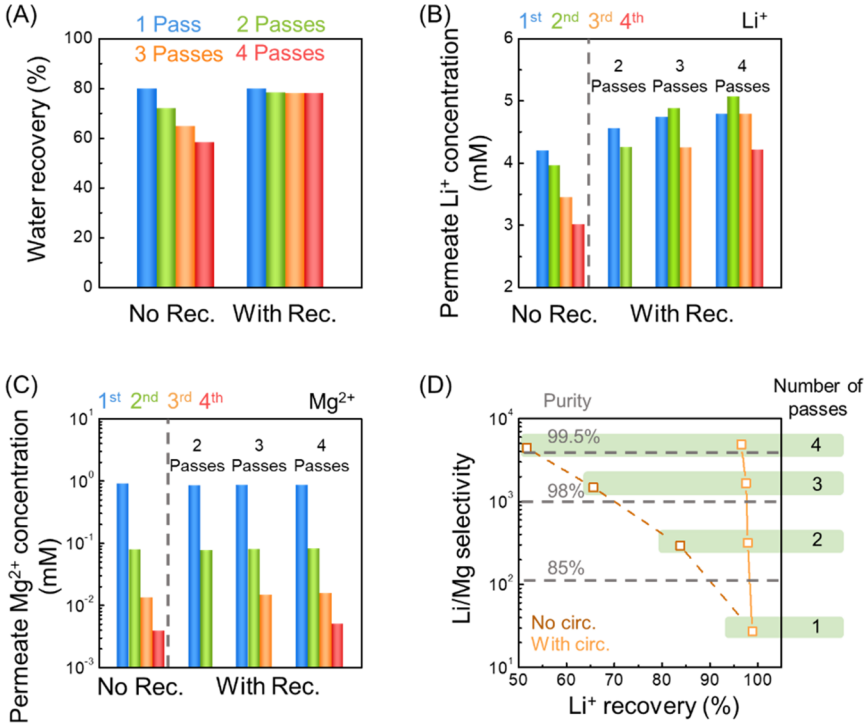

Figure 5. Lithium recovery of the multipass Li/Mg separation process enhanced by brine recirculation. (A) Water recovery with and without brine recirculation as a function of the number of passes. (B) Li^+ and (C) Mg^{2+} concentration in the permeate of each pass in the multipass NF process with and without brine recirculation. (D) Overall Li/Mg selectivity and Li recovery with and without recirculation as a function of the number of passes. Feed solution was the simple LiCl/$MgCl_2$ mixture. The pressure was 6 bar. Water recovery was set as 80% for the first pass and 90% for the rest. The mass transfer coefficient of 100 L m^{-2} h^{-1} was used to account for the concentration polarization. The labels "No Rec." and "With Rec." in the x axis stand for "without brine recirculation" and "with brine recirculation", respectively.

correlation (eq S4 and Table S6 of the Supporting Information) successfully captures the dependence of ion permeability variation upon Li^+ and Mg^{2+} concentrations in the brine stream after accounting for concentration polarization (Figure 4A). The module-scale NF model was then validated by predicting similar Li/Mg selectivity and Li recovery in a three-pass process without brine recirculation, for which we have collected experimental results (Figure 4B, in which the experimental curve is one of the curves reported in Figure 2D).

With a validated model that can reasonably predict the module-scale performance, the effect of brine recirculation was analyzed. The overall water recovery can maintain at near 80% over four passes when brine is recirculated, while less than 60% of feed water can be recovered without recirculation, which causes substantial Li loss (Figure 5A). With brine recirculation, Li^+ concentrations in the permeate of each pass are higher than those without recirculation (Figure 5B), while Mg^{2+} concentrations in the permeates remain similar (Figure 5C). Our simulation predicts that the Li/Mg selectivity can exceed 4000 (equivalent to 99.5% purity) with a four-pass filtration without brine recirculation but at the cost of substantial Li loss of around 15−20% in each pass of the second to fourth passes (dashed line in Figure 5D). A high Li/Mg selectivity (4889) and high Li recovery (96.6%) can be achieved simultaneously with four passes and brine recirculation (solid line in Figure 5D). Thus, the trade-off between selectivity and recovery can

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be overcome with brine recirculation. As long as we can achieve high Li recovery in the first pass (where brine is not recirculated), the configuration of multipass with recirculation can achieve extremely high Li/Mg selectivity while maintaining a high Li recovery. Additionally, the high Li recovery achieved by brine recirculation also results in the reduction of energy consumption from 0.30 to 0.18 kWh mol^{-1} in the four-pass NF process (Table S4 of the Supporting Information), although having recirculation adds process complexity and capital cost. A comprehensive techno-economic analysis is necessary to fairly compare the potential economic benefit of the multipass NF process to other different Li/Mg separation technologies after accounting for pre- and post-treatment unit processes in complete Li extraction treatment trains, which is beyond the scope of the current study.

IMPLICATIONS

NF is a promising unit process in the treatment train for extracting Li^+ from brine lakes with high mass ratios of Mg^{2+}/Li^+. However, the Li/Mg selectivity of currently available NF membranes is not high enough to satisfy the industrial product purity requirements in single-pass filtration. Advances in membrane material research may improve the situation but are unlikely to achieve satisfactory separation in a single pass. The multipass NF process with brine recirculation proposed in this study can achieve ultrahigh selectivity without sacrificing Li recovery. The performance may be further enhanced by optimizing the operating pressure and water recovery in each pass and applying novel NF membranes with better performance than the tested commercial NF membrane. We note that the feed solution used in this study is relatively dilute (corresponding to a large dilution factor), which shows benefits in the separation performance, although from a practical point of view, it will require a larger membrane area and a substantial amount of fresh water to initiate the process. Thus, the performance of the multipass NF with more concentrated feed solutions needs further investigation to evaluate the proper dilution factor considering the potential trade-off between the separation performance and cost. Lastly, although the context of this study is on Li/Mg separation, the technical approach of multipass NF with recirculation is expected to also be effective for other types of solute−solute separations in resource extraction and recovery.

ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge at https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acs.est.3c04220.

Module-scale NF model for Li/Mg separation (Text S1), properties of the commercial NF membrane used in this study (Table S1), composition of the synthetic brines to study impacts of co-existing cations and anions (Table S2), rejections of cations in the three-pass Li/Mg separation process (Table S3), energy consumption of the multipass NF process for Li/Mg separation (Table S4), fitted ion permeability at different concentrations and pressures (Table S5), linear correlation coefficients for ion permeability (Table S6), permeate flux at different water recoveries under different operating pressures in the first pass (Figure S1), ion mass concentration and MLR in the initial feed and permeates of each pass (Figure S2), and Li/Mg selectivity and Li recovery at different water recoveries under different pressures (Figure S3) (PDF)

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Corresponding Author

Shihong Lin − *Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering and Department of Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee 37235-1831, United States;* orcid.org/0000-0001-9832-9127; Email: shihong.lin@vanderbilt.edu

Authors

Ruoyu Wang − *Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee 37235-1831, United States*

Rayan Alghanayem − *Department of Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee 37235-1831, United States*

Complete contact information is available at: https://pubs.acs.org/10.1021/acs.est.3c04220

Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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