

20<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Chemical and Process Engineering CHISA 2012  
25 – 29 August 2012, Prague, Czech Republic

## An experimental study on the mechanical and microstructural properties of geopolymers

E. Arioz<sup>a</sup>, O. Arioz<sup>b</sup>, O. Mete Kockar<sup>a</sup> <sup>a\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Anadolu University, Iki Eylul Campus, Faculty of Engineering and Architecture, Department of Chemical Engineering, 26555, Eskisehir, Turkey

<sup>b</sup>Cimentas Beton, Cementir Holding, Izmir, Turkey

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### Abstract

Geopolymer is a new class of inorganic polymer synthesized by activation of an aluminosilicate source with an alkaline hydroxide or silicate solution. In recent years, geopolymeric materials have attracted much more attention because of their excellent mechanical properties, good chemical resistance, low shrinkage, environmentally friendly nature and long-term durability. Fly ash, considered to be a waste substance is an important aluminosilicate source material for geopolymer production since it contains sufficient amounts of reactive alumina and silica.

In this experimental study, F type fly ash was activated by 4M, 8M and 12M of sodium hydroxide and sodium silicate solutions and the effects of pH on the properties of geopolymeric samples were investigated. All the pastes were cured at 80°C for 15 hours. The compressive strength tests were carried out at the ages of 7 and 28 days. The samples aged 28 days were crushed and the degrees of reaction of all samples were determined. The microstructure of geopolymer samples were investigated by Scanning Electron Microscope(SEM)/ Energy Dispersive X-Ray(EDX) Spectrometer, X-ray diffractometry (XRD) and Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy(FTIR) techniques. According to results, the compressive strength of samples increased as the molarity of sodium hydroxide increased. It was observed that the workability of the pastes was negatively affected by increase in molarity of sodium hydroxide.

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**Keywords:** Geopolymer; fly ash; characterisation

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\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +90-222-3213550; fax: +90-222-3239501  
E-mail address: [evrenbayram@anadolu.edu.tr](mailto:evrenbayram@anadolu.edu.tr).

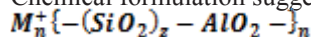
## 1. Introduction

As the industrialization grows in the world, the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions to atmosphere rise increasingly. Globally, the production of cement contributes at least 5-7% of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. The greenhouse emissions of cement industry hence concrete and the impact of fly ash on the emissions have examined in many studies. Fly ash and other by-products have been discussed as supplementary cementitious material in cement and use for geopolymerisation. The studies showed that geopolymer concrete has a potential alternative to standard concrete [1].

Inorganic geopolymeric binders can be synthesized by alkali-activation of aluminosilicate source with an alkaline hydroxide and/or silicate solution. The aluminosilicate source can be industrial waste materials such as fly ash, blast furnace slag or natural materials such as mineral aggregates, natural rocks [2,3]. Geopolymers contains amorphous aluminosilicate gel consisting of three dimensional framework of SiO<sub>4</sub> and AlO<sub>4</sub> tetrahedra linked by O atoms. Alkali metal cations balance negative charge of the Al tetrahedral sites in the framework [3].

Geopolymers can be used in many fields due to their various properties like high compressive strength, low shrinkage, acid and fire resistance. Raw materials affect the chemical reactions during the synthesis hence the properties of geopolymers. Microstructure, physical, mechanical and chemical properties are also affected by the raw material type [4]. Another important factor affecting the geopolymerisation is alkali activating solution. NaOH is the most common activator affecting significantly the compressive strength and the structure of geopolymers [5]. Alkalinity affects the dissolution of raw material and the degree of polymerization. At the high concentrations of alkali activator, silicate species in the solution increases.

Chemical formulation suggested for geopolymers is:



where M<sup>+</sup> is alkali cation, n degree of polymerization and z is the Si/Al ratio. Geopolymerization involves dissolution, reorientation and solidification reactions [6].

## 2. Methods

F-class fly ash, technical grade sodium hydroxide and sodium silicate were used for the geopolymer synthesis. In order to investigate the effect of pH on the mechanical and microstructural properties, 4M, 8M and 12M of sodium hydroxide solutions were prepared. NaOH solutions were prepared with distilled water and let cool down to room temperature. After cooling, sodium hydroxide added to sodium silicate and stirred 15 minutes to obtain homogeneity. The hydroxide-silicate mixture then added to fly ash and again stirred. Geopolymeric paste obtained after stirring poured to steel moulds. The pastes cured at 80°C for 15 hours. When curing completed, the pastes demoulded and aged for 7 and 28 days at atmospheric conditions.

For all specimens, compressive strength tests were carried out at the ages of 7 and 28 days. 28 days samples were crushed after compressive strength tests and degree of reaction determined with these samples. 3g of crushed samples added to 2M of HCl solution and stirred for 20 minutes at 60°C. After filtration samples were washed with distilled water and then acetone. The samples were dried at 70°C for 2 hours. Dried samples were added to 3% Na<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> solution and stirred for 20 minutes at 80°C [7]. Samples were again filtrated and dried at 70°C for 2 hours. Loss of ignition was determined with X-ray Fluorescence. The degree of reaction was calculated by mass difference as follows:

$$\text{Degree of reaction\%} = (m_{\text{sample}} - [m_{\text{residue}} (1 + LOI)]) / m_{\text{sample}} \times 100 \quad (1)$$

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