Monte Carlo simulation of ICRF discharge initiation at $\omega_{LHR} < \omega$

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Introduction

The radio-frequency (RF) plasma production technique in the ion cyclotron range of frequency (ICRF) is applied for wall conditioning (ICWC) in superconducting fusion machines ($T_e = 3 - 5$ eV, $n_e < 10^{12}$ cm$^{-3}$), for RF-assisted start-up in tokamaks and for target plasma production ($n_e = 10^{13}$ cm$^{-3}$) in stellarators [1].

To investigate plasma initiation by ICRF antennas the Monte Carlo code RFdinity1D was developed and presented in [2]. The code was improved recently on several of its aspects concerning 3D binary collision physics, implementation of Coulomb collisions and electron losses due to drifts and recombinations. A description with focus on its improvement compared to the previous version will be given in next section, simulation results and comparison with experiments on TEXTOR are presented in the third and fourth section.

Model Description

The 1D code describes the motion of electrons around the torus along one toroidal magnetic line by two velocity components: a component perpendicular ($v_\theta = \sqrt{v_x^2 + v_y^2}$) and parallel ($v_z$) to the magnetic field line. This report presents simulations for one-strap and two-strap antenna electric field (monopole phasing). The electric field profile $E_z$ for each strap is approximated by the sum of two Gaussians with opposite sign centered around the two gaps between the strap and the antenna box. The shape of the profile is based on vacuum field simulations for the ITER antenna by Lyssoivan [1]. The electrons are accelerated by the parallel component of the RF electric field $E_z$ (with respect to $B_T$) in front of the antenna and are initially uniformly distributed along the length of the magnetic field line with initial velocities sampled from a low energy Maxwell distribution ($T_{e,0} = 0.5$ eV).

The collisions of electrons with hydrogen molecules are treated according to a Monte Carlo Collision schema (MCCS) [3]. The electron specific free path length is calculated by

$$\lambda^{MC} = \frac{1}{n_{H_2}\sigma_T(\varepsilon_i) + n_e\sigma_{\text{rec}}(\varepsilon_i)} \log(1 - \xi),$$  \hspace{1cm} (1)

where $n_{H_2}$ and $n_e$ are the hydrogen and electron densities, $\sigma_T(\varepsilon_i)$ is the sum of the electron impact collision cross sections of ionization, excitation and dissociation reactions for the electron energy $\varepsilon_i$, $\sigma_{\text{rec}}(\varepsilon_i)$ is the electron ion recombination cross section, and $\xi$ is a random number.
(0 ≤ ξ < 1). Upon the collision, the collision type is determined according to MCCS and the scattering angle is calculated with respect to the type of the collision [3]. In case of an ionization collision, the energy of the ejected electron strongly depends on the energy of the incoming electron, implemented in the model according to [3].

The electron-ion Coulomb collisions are calculated according to Takizuke-Abe [4], and are included in the simulation once the electron density reaches $n_e = 10^{14}$ m$^{-3}$. The ion population, uniformly distributed over the torus, is considered to be Maxwellian, with temperature corrected after each coulomb collision.

**Simulating breakdown**

Plasma initiation is governed by electron impact ionization. At low densities, when recombination and drift losses are insignificant the electron density ($n_e$) time evolution follows the equation

$$\frac{dn_e}{dt} = n_e n_{H_2} \langle \sigma(\varepsilon) v^\text{ion}_{e,H_2} \rangle = n_e v_{\text{ion}},$$

(2)

where $n_{H_2} \langle \sigma(\varepsilon) v^\text{ion}_{e,H_2} \rangle$ is the ionization rate $v_{\text{ion}}$. Figure 1(a) gives three simulated electron density evolutions in time for the electric field with one strap in a TEXTOR torus size. The simulations with $E_0 = 12$ kV/m and $E_0 = 20$ kV/m at $f = 29$ MHz reach a stable density level of $n_e \approx 6 \cdot 10^{18}$ m$^{-3}$ within 1 ms. The density saturation occurs due to two effects: i) the recombination reactions become frequent and balance out the ionization reactions, ii) the drop of the hydrogen density $n_{H_2}$ in the considered closed system with constant number of particles reduces the $e-H_2$ collision frequency. The threshold density when the Coulomb collisions ($n_e = 10^{14}$ m$^{-3}$) are taken into account is highlighted in Fig. 1(a) (black dashed line). It is clear that at this stage the electron-ion Coulomb collisions do not have a significant effect on the evolution of $n_e$ (see Fig. 1(a)). However at higher electron density the electron energy distribution converges into a Maxwell distribution with an energetic tail. The critical density for both slow waves (SW) excitation ($\omega = \omega_{p,e}$) $n_{e,\text{crit}}^{\text{SW(cut-off)}}$ and the low hybrid resonance ($\omega = \omega_{LHR}$) $n_{e,\text{crit}}^{\text{SW(LHR)}}$ are as well indicated. A first principle validity limit of the present code version is considered to be $n_{e,\text{crit}}^{\text{SW(cut-off)}}$. It is expected that upon slow wave excitation the $E_\parallel$ field will diverge from the vacuum field. On approaching the LHR, where $E_\parallel$ becomes very strong the vacuum field cannot be used further and simulation results beyond this density with the present code version are not valid. The numerical definition of the breakdown moment in simulations was nevertheless put at the upper validity limit $n_{e,\text{crit}}^{\text{SW(LHR)}}$, based on [5].

**Simulated dependencies on Electric field strength and frequency**

$E$-scan and $f$-scan simulations at $p_{H_2} = 0.05$ Pa with TEXTOR torus dimensions and a hypothetical one strap antenna with dimensions corresponding to one strap of the TEXTOR double strap antenna are shown in Figure 1(b). The points represent a surface of $v_{\text{ion}}$ (See eq. (2)) in the $E$-$f$ plane. The $f$-scan suggests a decreasing $v_{\text{ion}}$ with increasing frequency in the ICRF range of
interest. Furthermore, it is clear that for fixed frequency the values of \( \nu_{\text{ion}} \) remain close to unchanged above 25 kV/m, suggesting the existence of an optimal minimal electric field strength above which the ionization rate \( \nu_{\text{ion}} \) and also the breakdown time remain constant. For the lower electric fields a rapid increase of \( \nu_{\text{ion}} \) is observed from a threshold \( E_0 \) where the plasma initiation becomes possible until the described optimal \( E_0 \).

The shape for the simulated \( E \)-dependency can be partially explained based on the theory presented in [6], separating the ionization rate near the antenna \( \nu_{\text{ion}}^{RF} \) where electrons gain energy from the oscillating RF field, from the ionization rate far from the antenna region \( \nu_{\text{ion}}^{PMD} \) where electrons are considered to gain energy from the Ponderomotive force as illustrated in figure 1(c). The approximative theory predicts for both rates a dependency on the ratio of electric field strength and frequency \( E_0 / f \). The dependencies are plotted in Figure 1(c) together with simulations at \( p_{H_2} = 0.01 \) Pa, fixed frequency of 29 MHz and varying \( E_0 \). All three curves were normalized for better legibility. The theoretical \( E_0 / f \) dependency is however not sufficient to fully describe the \( \nu_{\text{ion}} \) dependency on \( E_0 \) and \( f \). The ionisation rates for the two green highlighted points shown in Fig. 1(b) with equal \( E_0 / f \) ratio, given in Table 1, differ by a factor \( \sim 2.8 \). The latter evidences the need to explore the \( \nu_{\text{ion}} \) dependency on \( E_0 \) and \( f \) by using more sophisticated models (for example RFdinity1D presented here).

**RF power scan and pressure scan and comparison with experiments**

Simulations with the idealized monopole electric field for TEXTOR torus and antenna dimensions were performed to compare them with the experimental breakdown time \( (t_{\text{bkd}}) \) dependencies on RF power and pressure obtained on TEXTOR.

The Figure 2(a) represents \( t_{\text{bkd}} \) as a function of the electric field strength in the simula-

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**Figure 1:** Parametric discharge initiation scans for TEXTOR torus size dimensions for electric field of one strap: (a) \( n_e \) as a function of time with exponential fits (Eq. (2)) at \( p_{H_2} = 0.05 \) Pa. (b) Surface of \( \nu_{\text{ion}} \) in \( E \cdot f \) plane at \( p_{H_2} = 0.05 \) Pa. (c) Normalized ionization rate \( \nu_{\text{ion}}^{\text{NORM}} \) as function of \( E_0 / f \) for theoretical formulas \( \nu_{\text{ion}}^{RF} \) and \( \nu_{\text{ion}}^{PMD} \) together with simulated values at \( p_{H_2} = 0.01 \) Pa.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>( E_0 )</th>
<th>( f )</th>
<th>( E_0 / f )</th>
<th>( \nu_{\text{ion}} )</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>( 5.283 \cdot 10^4 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>( 1.905 \cdot 10^4 )</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1:** The values of \( E_0 \), \( f \) and \( \nu_{\text{ion}} \) for same ratio of \( E_0 / f \).
tions and the experiments. The experimental $t_{bkd}$ tendency is clearly reproduced by the simulations. The values for the experimental plot were estimated at best effort from the voltage at the feeding point of the strap via transmission line voltage measurements taking into account the radial exponential decay of the $E_\parallel$ field in the torus. The saturation in the experiments occurs around $E_0 \approx 20$ kV/m ($P_{ANT} = 100$ kW) while the saturation in the simulations starts around $E_0 \approx 10$ kV/m.

Experimental breakdown times $t_{bkd}$ as a function of pressure with constant antenna power $P_{ANT} = 100$ kW at $f = 29$ MHz are shown in Figure 2(b) (red curve) together with the simulations for $f = 29$ MHz and two electric field amplitudes: $E_0 = 5$ kV/m and $E_0 = 20$ kV/m. At higher $E_0$, the $t_{bkd}$ is not expected to vary much (See Fig. 2(a)). Again the simulated trend matches the experimental one.

Figure 2: (a) Breakdown time as a function of electric field strength for simulation at $p_{H_2} = 0.018$ Pa and $f = 29$ MHz (blue line) and for experiment on TEXTOR at $p_{H_2} = 0.018$ Pa and $f = 29$ MHz (red line), (b) Breakdown time as a function of neutral pressure $p_{H_2}$ at $f = 29$ MHz and for two electric field amplitudes $E_0 = 5$ kV/m and $E_0 = 20$ kV/m (blue and green lines), the red lines represent experimental $t_{bkd}$ on TEXTOR.

Acknowledgements

This work was carried out using the HELIOS supercomputer system at Computational Simulation Centre of International Fusion Energy Research Centre (IFERC-CSC), Aomori, Japan, under the Broader Approach collaboration between Euratom and Japan, implemented by Fusion for Energy and JAEA. This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement number 633053. The views and opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the European Commission.

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