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A miniaturized piezoelectric turbine with self-regulation for increased air speed range

Hailing Fu and Eric M. Yeatman
Department of Electrical and Electronic Engineering, Imperial College London, London SW7 2AZ, United Kingdom

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This paper presents the design and demonstration of a piezoelectric turbine with self-regulation for increased air speed range. The turbine’s transduction is achieved by magnetic “plucking” of a piezoelectric beam by the passing rotor. The increased speed range is achieved by the self-regulating mechanism which can dynamically adjust the magnetic coupling between the magnets on the turbine rotor and the piezoelectric beam using a micro-spring. The spring is controlled passively by the centrifugal force of the magnet on the rotor. This mechanism automatically changes the relative position of the magnets at different rotational speeds, making the coupling weak at low airflow speeds and strong at high speeds. Hence, the device can start up with a low airflow speed, and the output power can be ensured when the airflow speed is high. A theoretical model was established to analyse the turbine’s performance, advantages, and to optimize its design parameters. A prototype was fabricated and tested in a wind tunnel. The start-up airflow speed was 2.34 m/s, showing a 30% improvement against a harvester without the mechanism. © 2015 Author(s). All article content, except where otherwise noted, is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1063/1.4938000]

Due to the decreasing power consumption of microelectronics, the concept of autonomous sensing devices is realizable by harnessing the wasted ambient energy for power supply. Airflow is a widespread energy source in many domestic and industrial situations, including ventilation systems, mining tunnels, and moving vehicles, where wireless sensor nodes are often installed. Hence, airflow energy harvesters are potential alternatives to conventional batteries for wireless sensing devices.

Airflow energy harvesting using miniaturized turbines has drawn significant interest for the past years. Holmes et al. demonstrated a millimeter-scale turbine using microfabrication. Priya et al. developed a piezoelectric energy harvester using a windmill structure. Fu and Yeatman adapted the magnetic plucking method into a piezoelectric turbine to achieve the non-contact plucking of piezoelectric beams. However, the start-up airflow speed is still a main barrier for these harvesters to extract airflow energy at low speeds. Howey et al. employed high-quality jewel bearings to minimize the friction, but the main resistance in these devices is still given by the magnetic coupling force. Kishore et al. adopted large-size blades to generate a higher driving torque at low speeds, which is undesirable for small-scale devices.

A feasible way to decrease the start-up speed and to maintain the output power at high speeds is to alter the magnetic coupling automatically along with the airflow speed. Self-regulating mechanisms, as a potential solution, have been used in many energy harvesting devices. Lallart et al. developed a broadband vibration energy harvester using additional sensing and actuating components to adjust the resonant frequency of the beam along with the excitation frequency. The bandwidth of the structure improved significantly, but the generated power was partially consumed by these components. Miller et al. built a self-tuning vibration energy harvester by mounting a sliding proof mass on a clamped-clamped beam. The position of the mass adjusts automatically with respect to vibration frequency, extending the bandwidth of the device. Gu and Livermore designed a rotational self-regulating energy harvester by adjusting the beam’s tensile stress generated by the centrifugal force. The stress adjusted the stiffness and the resonant frequency of the beam, enabling the resonant frequency to be identical to the excitation frequency in a wide operating range. By adopting a suitable self-regulating method, a piezoelectric turbine with a low start-up airflow speed was designed and is presented in this paper.

The schematic of the turbine is illustrated in Fig. 1. The self-regulating mechanism is achieved by changing the magnetic coupling in respond to the airflow speed using a spring-centrifugal governor system, enabling the device to start up at low airflow speed and to enhance the output power at high speeds.

FIG. 1. Design of the micro piezoelectric turbine, showing the implementation of the self-regulating mechanism.

*Electronic mail: h.fu1@imperial.ac.uk
rigidly connected with a spring which is designed to control the radial position of the magnet.

The schematic of the self-regulating system is shown in Fig. 2(a). In a windless condition, the device is stationary with the spring unstretched. The gap between the magnets is correspondingly large, ensuring that the coupling is weak enough for the turbine to start up at a low airflow speed. When the airflow speed is increased and the rotational speed of the rotor rises, the centrifugal force generated by the rotating magnet increases. As the spring is stretched, the gap decreases, intensifying the magnetic coupling and improving the output power.

If we assume that the turbine is activated by airflow and operates at a rotational frequency of \( \omega_r \), then the gaps between magnets in 3 axes are

\[
\begin{align*}
d_x &= r_{m0} + d_{x0} - r_m \cos(\omega_r t - \varphi_{m0}), \\
d_y &= r_m \sin(\omega_r t - \varphi_{m0}) - \omega(L, t), \\
d_z &= d_{z0},
\end{align*}
\]

where \( d_{x0} \) and \( d_{z0} \) are the initial gaps along the x-axis and z-axis when the rotor is static, with the sliding magnet’s angular position \( \varphi_{m0} = 0 \), \( \omega(L, t) \) is the tip displacement of the piezoelectric beam in the y-direction, and \( r_m \) is the rotational radius of the sliding magnet, which is given by

\[
r_m = \frac{k_s l_{p0}}{k_x - m_m \omega^2 r_m},
\]

where \( k_s \) is the spring constant, \( r_{p0} \) is the initial radius of the sliding magnet, and \( m_m \) is the mass of the sliding magnet.

The magnetic coupling force, \( F_{mag} \), in the beam vibration direction can be calculated numerically using the theory given by Akoun and Yonnet.\(^{16}\) The configuration of the magnet coupling is illustrated in Fig. 2(b). The magnetic force between two cuboidal magnets in the beam vibration direction can be calculated using

\[
F_{mag}^y = \frac{J \cdot J'}{4 \pi \mu_0} \sum_{j=0}^{1} \sum_{j=0}^{1} \sum_{k=0}^{1} \sum_{l=0}^{1} \sum_{p=0}^{1} \sum_{q=0}^{1} (-1)^{j' + j + k + l + p + q} \phi_j,
\]

where \( J \) and \( J' \) are the magnetization of magnets, \( \mu_0 \) is the magnetic constant, and \( \phi_j \) is a function of the magnet dimensions and their gaps in 3 axes. The function is given by

\[
\phi_j = \frac{1}{2} \left( U_{ij}^2 - W_{pq}^2 \right) \ln(r - V_{kl}) + U_{ij} V_{kl} \ln(r - U_{ij}) + U_{ij} W_{pq} \tan^{-1}\left( \frac{U_{ij} V_{kl}}{W_{pq}} \right) - \frac{1}{2} r V_{kl}.
\]

where

\[
\begin{align*}
U_{ij} &= d_z + (-1)^j A - (-1)^j a, \\
V_{kl} &= d_z + (-1)^k B - (-1)^k b, \\
W_{pq} &= d_z + (-1)^p C - (-1)^p c, \\
r &= \sqrt{U_{ij}^2 + V_{kl}^2 + W_{pq}^2}.
\end{align*}
\]

These lengths, \( U_{ij}, V_{kl}, \) and \( W_{pq} \), correspond to the distance between the cube corners and their projections on the axes. The parameters \( i, j, k, l, p, \) and \( q \), are equal to 0 or 1 according to the specific corner.

The magnetic force on the tip magnet excites the piezoelectric beam once per cycle. Erturk and Inman established a comprehensive theoretical model for the beam operating with base excitation.\(^{17}\) By adapting this theory to tip force excitation, the coupling equations describing the motion of the beam are given as follows:

\[
\begin{align*}
Y_l \frac{d^2 \omega(x, t)}{dx^2} + c_4 \frac{d^2 \omega(x, t)}{dt^2} + c_d \frac{d\omega(x, t)}{dt} + m \frac{\partial^2 \omega(x, t)}{\partial t^2} \\
- \partial \varphi(t) \left[ \frac{d\delta(x)}{dx} - \frac{d\delta(x - L)}{dx} \right] &= F_{mag}^y(t),
\end{align*}
\]

and

\[
\frac{C_p}{2} \frac{dv(t)}{dt} + \frac{v(t)}{R_b} + \bar{e}_{31} h_p + h_s b L \int_0^L \frac{\partial^2 \omega(x, t)}{\partial x^2} dt = 0,
\]

where \( Y_l \) is the bending stiffness, \( \omega(x, t) \) is the transverse deformation of the beam, \( c_d \) is the internal damping, \( c_4 \) is the viscous deformation damping, \( m \) is the mass per unit length of the beam, \( \delta \) is the Dirac delta function, \( \varphi \) is the piezoelectric coupling term in physical coordinates, \( \varphi(t) \) is the voltage across a resistive load \( R_b \), \( C_p \) is the inherent capacitance of the piezoelectric beam, \( \bar{e}_{31} \) is the piezoelectric constant, \( h_p \) and \( h_s \) are the height of the piezoelectric layer and the substrate layer, respectively, \( b \) is the width of the beam, and \( L \) is the length of the beam.

The performance of the piezoelectric turbine was analysed theoretically using the above analysis. A device was designed with the parameters listed in Table I. Fig. 3 illustrates the regulating behaviour and the operating principle of the harvester based on the above equations and parameters. The system has a weak magnetic coupling at low frequencies.

**TABLE I. Design parameters of the piezoelectric turbine.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Symbol</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L × b</td>
<td>Beam size</td>
<td>26.5 mm × 1.5 mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( h_p )</td>
<td>Thickness of piezo layer</td>
<td>0.1 mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( h_s )</td>
<td>Thickness of substrate</td>
<td>0.1 mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( r_r )</td>
<td>Radius of turbine rotor</td>
<td>27 mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( a × b × c )</td>
<td>Sliding magnet size</td>
<td>2.5 × 0.75 × 0.5 mm³</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( A × B × C )</td>
<td>Tip magnet size</td>
<td>0.5 × 0.5 × 0.5 mm³</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( d_{x0} )</td>
<td>Initial gap in z-axis</td>
<td>3.2 mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( J )</td>
<td>Magnetization of magnets</td>
<td>1.17 T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( \rho_m )</td>
<td>Density of magnets</td>
<td>7400 kg/m³</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( \bar{e}_{31} )</td>
<td>Piezoelectric constant</td>
<td>-22.2 V × m/N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( r_{p0} )</td>
<td>Spring free length</td>
<td>8 mm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
which enables the system to start up at low airflow speeds. The coupling is enhanced at high frequencies (33 Hz) by the centrifugal force of the sliding magnet, allowing the output power to be improved.

The spring constant is a critical parameter determining the self-regulating behaviour. In order to decrease the start-up airflow speed and to intensify the magnetic coupling quickly after start-up, the behaviour was investigated with different spring constants $k_s$. The initial length, $r_{m0}$, of the spring is 8.2 mm and the initial gap, $d_{g0}$, of the magnet in the $x$ direction is 3.8 mm. The regulating behaviour initiates when the turbine starts operating and terminates at the maximum magnetic coupling ($r_m = r_{m0} + d_{g0}$) by a mechanical stopper on the spring.

As illustrated in Fig. 4, the magnetic coupling after the regulating stage is 6 times higher than that in the initial stage, which indicates the effect of the regulating mechanism. The range of the self-regulating behaviour depends on the spring constant, extending with increasing spring constant. In this mechanism, the regulating range should be as narrow as possible in order to enhance the output power after start-up. The spring constant, therefore, should be low enough to fulfill the requirement.

In order to achieve a low spring constant, a micro planar tensile spring was fabricated from titanium foil by laser machining. The width and thickness of the spring beam are 110 $\mu$m and 200 $\mu$m, respectively. The spring constant was measured as 2.28 N/m. The self-regulating mechanism is implemented by the partial assembly in Fig. 5(a). The turbine rotor and casing were built from Verowhite Plus material using the 3D printer Stratasys Objet 500 Connex 3. The assembled prototype is presented in Fig. 5(b). The turbine has six inlets arranged on the lateral sides of the hexagonal prism casing, allowing the device to operate with airflow from any direction. The inlets work as concentrators with the cross-sectional area narrowed down as the airflow gets into the turbine.

The prototype was tested in a miniature wind tunnel. Its schematic is shown in Fig. 6; it is an open loop wind tunnel with continuously variable airspeed control. It comprises four major components: contraction, test section, diffuser, and fan. Airflow enters the tunnel from the contraction section and exits from the diffuser. The performance of the harvester was measured in the test section, whose dimension is 100 mm $\times$ 85 mm $\times$ 85 mm. A pitot tube used to measure the airflow speed was installed in parallel with the harvester in the test section.

The turbine was tested against load resistance and airflow speed. The optimal load resistance of the device is 100 k$\Omega$, as shown in Fig. 7. The maximum peak power output at 3.94 m/s airflow speed is 705 $\mu$W.

In order to validate the self-regulating mechanism, the device was tested at varied airflow speeds. Fig. 8 depicts the peak output power and the rotational frequency of the turbine rotor against airflow speed. The start-up airflow speed of the device is 2.34 m/s and the regulating behaviour terminates at 4.21 m/s, where a 742 $\mu$W peak output power was measured.

FIG. 3. Simulated results: Gap between the magnets, magnetic force, and output voltage of the piezoelectric turbine. (a) Operating at 13.8 Hz and (b) operating at 33 Hz ($k_s = 8.5$ N/m).

FIG. 4. Simulated self-regulating behaviour with different spring constants. (a) Spring length versus turbine rotational frequency and (b) peak magnetic force in the $y$ direction versus rotational frequency.

FIG. 5. Prototype. (a) Implementation of the self-regulating mechanism and (b) piezoelectric turbine ($37$ mm $\times$ 18 mm).

FIG. 6. Schematic of the experimental set-up.

FIG. 7. Peak and average output power of the harvester versus load resistance at 3.94 m/s airflow speed.
with a 100 kΩ load. The frequency up-conversion mechanisms employed in this device addresses the falling-off of output power caused by frequency mismatching at high airflow speeds observed by Karami et al.

The device without the self-regulating mechanism was also tested. The start-up airflow speed was 3.35 m/s. It indicates that the self-regulating mechanism has reduced the requirement of the start-up airflow speed to 30%. Compared to other airflow energy harvesters, this piezoelectric turbine also shows improved performance in power density and start-up airflow speed (Table II). The design from Howey et al. has the highest power density; however, the structure is complex and the cost for fabrication is likely to be much higher. In addition, the power density using electromagnetic conversion is in the same order as the density using piezoelectric conversion in this paper. The power density in this paper is 4.48 μW/cm³, which can be further improved by integrating multiple piezoelectric beams and optimizing the structure of the device. The design from Kishore et al. has the lowest start-up speed, but the size is higher and the power density is the lowest. The start-up speed of the device in this paper can be decreased by minimizing the frictions.

In conclusion, a piezoelectric turbine aiming at extracting airflow energy at low speeds is presented in this paper. A passive self-regulating mechanism is implemented by dynamically adjusting the magnetic coupling between the two magnets on the turbine rotor and the piezoelectric beam using a micro spring. The device, therefore, can start up with a low airflow speed and the output power can be ensured when the airflow speed is high. A theoretical model was established to analyse the turbine’s performance, advantages, and to optimize its design parameters. A prototype was fabricated and tested in a wind tunnel. The start-up airflow speed was 2.34 m/s, showing a 30% improvement against the untuned harvester. The piezoelectric turbine has an improved performance against other harvesters in terms of power density and start-up airflow speed.

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REFERENCES


FIG. 8. Peak average output power and rotational frequency of the harvester with a 100 kΩ load versus airflow speed.

TABLE II. Power density and start-up speed of airflow energy harvesters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Device</th>
<th>Transduction</th>
<th>Dimension (mm)</th>
<th>Power density</th>
<th>Start-up speed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ref. 5</td>
<td>T and PE</td>
<td>$96 \times 254 \times 127$</td>
<td>1.615</td>
<td>2.41 m/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ref. 8</td>
<td>T and PE</td>
<td>$47 \times 42 \times 25$</td>
<td>2.533</td>
<td>3.5 m/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ref. 9</td>
<td>T and EM</td>
<td>$82 \times 50$</td>
<td>7.460</td>
<td>3 m/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ref. 10</td>
<td>T and PE</td>
<td>$100 \times 80 \times 65$</td>
<td>0.865</td>
<td>1.1 m/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ref. 19</td>
<td>T and PE</td>
<td>$80 \times 80 \times 175$</td>
<td>0.446</td>
<td>2.0 m/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ref. 20</td>
<td>PE</td>
<td>$100 \times 60 \times 30$</td>
<td>1.389</td>
<td>3.6 m/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ref. 21</td>
<td>PE</td>
<td>$141 \times 100 \times 55$</td>
<td>1.676</td>
<td>2.5 m/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ours</td>
<td>T and PE</td>
<td>$37 \times 18$</td>
<td>4.480</td>
<td>2.34 m/s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The air speed is 4 m/s, and the unit is μW/cm³.

The total output power of 71.7 μW was obtained at 4 m/s airflow speed with a 100 kΩ resistor.