

**Instability of NiMoS₂ and CoMoS₂ Hydrodesulfurization Catalysts at Ambient Conditions
A Quasi in Situ High-Resolution Transmission Electron Microscopy and X-ray
Photoelectron Spectroscopy Study**

Bremmer, G. Marien; Van Haandel, Lennart; Hensen, Emiel J M; Frenken, Joost W M; Kooyman, Patricia J.

DOI

[10.1021/acs.jpcc.6b06030](https://doi.org/10.1021/acs.jpcc.6b06030)

Publication date

2016

Document Version

Accepted author manuscript

Published in

The Journal of Physical Chemistry C

Citation (APA)

Bremmer, G. M., Van Haandel, L., Hensen, E. J. M., Frenken, J. W. M., & Kooyman, P. J. (2016). Instability of NiMoS₂ and CoMoS₂ Hydrodesulfurization Catalysts at Ambient Conditions: A Quasi in Situ High-Resolution Transmission Electron Microscopy and X-ray Photoelectron Spectroscopy Study. *The Journal of Physical Chemistry C*, 120(34), 19204-19211. <https://doi.org/10.1021/acs.jpcc.6b06030>

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The Instability of NiMoS₂ and CoMoS₂ HDS

Catalysts at Ambient Conditions: A *quasi-in-situ*

HRTEM and XPS Study

*G. Marien Bremmer,[†] Lennart van Haandel,[‡] Emiel J.M. Hensen,[‡] Joost W.M. Frenken,^{†, ⊥}
Patricia J. Kooyman ^{*,§, //}*

[†] Huygens-Kamerlingh Onnes Laboratory, Leiden University, Niels Bohrweg 2, 2333 CA,
Leiden, The Netherlands.

[‡] Schuit Institute of Catalysis, Eindhoven University of Technology, Het Kranenveld 14, 5600
MB, Eindhoven, The Netherlands.

[§] ChemE, Delft University of Technology, Van der Maasweg 9, 2629 HZ, Delft, The
Netherlands.

Corresponding Author

* Patricia J. Kooyman, Telephone: +27-21-650-2732, E-mail: patricia.kooyman@uct.ac.za

Present Addresses

⊥ Advanced Research Center for Nanolithography, Science Park 110, 1098 XG, Amsterdam,
The Netherlands.

// Department of Chemical Engineering, University of Cape Town, Private Bag X3,
Rondebosch, 7701 Cape Town, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

The effect of exposure to ambient air of MoS₂-based, γ -Al₂O₃-supported, hydrodesulfurization (HDS) catalysts has been studied using high-resolution transmission electron microscopy (HRTEM). Analysis of unpromoted as well as Ni- and Co-promoted MoS₂ samples showed that the number of MoS₂ slabs and the average slab length decreased as a function of air exposure time. A parallel X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) study showed this effect to be due to oxidation. During the first 24 h of exposure to air, all 1 bar sulfided (Ni/Co)MoS₂ samples showed an initial slab length decrease of around 20%. After an additional month in air, the slabs had deteriorated significantly further. A sample of CoMoS₂ sulfided at 30 bar showed a slightly enhanced effect of oxidation, particularly after the first 5 minutes in air. The combined HRTEM and XPS results lead to the proposal of the formation of a protective oxide ring around the remaining sulfidic species inside the MoS₂ slabs to explain the mechanism of this oxidation process. The data obtained in this study emphasize the general necessity of shielding vulnerable catalyst samples from air during preparation and characterization, a message relevant in all fields of research related to catalysis.

1. Introduction

Current environmental legislation pushes oil refiners towards producing transportation fuels with progressively lower sulfur levels in order to limit the emission of harmful sulfur-containing exhaust gases into the atmosphere ¹. The main reaction used to remove organosulfur compounds from oil feedstock is the catalytic hydrodesulfurization (HDS) reaction. The industrial HDS catalysts used most for this purpose are based on MoS₂, present in the form of nanometer-sized slabs dispersed on a high-surface-area support, such as γ -Al₂O₃ ². MoS₂ catalyst slabs consist of one layer of molybdenum atoms, sandwiched between two layers of sulfur atoms ²⁻⁴. MoS₂ is also being studied as a material with interesting electrical properties (e.g. to be used as a semiconductor material in nanoelectronics ⁵⁻⁸), it has applications in photocatalysis ^{9,10}, and MoS₂ is used as a solid lubricant ¹¹⁻¹³. Research on MoS₂ has been a long ongoing effort, in which a wide variety of characterization techniques has been used. In 2008, Kooyman and van Veen have shown the importance of shielding γ -Al₂O₃-supported MoS₂ catalysts from ambient air, between preparation and characterization ¹⁴. Their transmission electron microscopy (TEM) study indicated that exposing MoS₂ samples to ambient air leads to deterioration of the catalyst slabs, but no mechanism for this phenomenon was proposed.

Promoting MoS₂-slabs with metal atoms such as nickel or cobalt has the effect of enhancing the catalytic activity of the catalyst, as well as influencing the specific selectivity ¹⁵⁻¹⁷. The influence of the incorporated promoter atoms on the stability of the catalyst slabs has not yet been studied. The effect of the promoter atoms could be stabilizing, causing the slabs not to deteriorate due to mere exposure to ambient condition, but the effect might also cause less stability in air, as the

promoted catalyst slabs are more reactive in general due to the presence of more coordinatively unsaturated sites.

We have investigated this issue by using quasi-in-situ high-resolution transmission electron microscopy (HRTEM) to monitor the effect of ambient air on NiMoS₂, CoMoS₂, and MoS₂ samples sulfided at 1 bar. After preparation of the samples, special care was taken to prevent contact to air during transportation and prior to the TEM imaging. We determined the average length and stacking of the catalyst slabs for each sample after the first TEM measurements, without contact to ambient air, as well as after 24 h and after 1 month of air exposure. As many industrial processes using these catalysts are operated at high pressures (30 – 100 bar), a Co-promoted MoS₂-catalyst was sulfided at 30 bar for comparison. A parallel quasi-in-situ X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) study was performed to monitor the chemical changes of the catalyst, following the same approach of air exposure.

2. Experimental

2.1. Preparation of catalysts

The four catalyst samples were prepared by incipient-wetness co-impregnation of Ketjen CK-300 γ -Al₂O₃ extrudates (SBET = 250 m²/g, V_{pore} = 0.66 ml/g), which were crushed and sieved to a 125-250 μ m fraction prior to impregnation. Different aqueous solutions containing cobalt(II) nitrate (Co(NO₃)₂·6H₂O, Merck), nickel(II) nitrate (Ni(NO₃)₂·6H₂O, Merck), ammonium heptamolybdate ((NH₄)₆Mo₇O₂₄·4H₂O, Merck), and nitrilotriacetic acid (NTA, (C₂H₃O₂)₃N, Merck) were prepared to obtain catalysts with 8 wt% Mo, and 1.5 wt% Co or Ni for the

promoted catalysts. The molar ratio of NTA:Mo was 1.2:1. All catalyst precursors were dried at room temperature for 1 hour, dried in static air at 100 °C overnight and finally calcined at 450 °C (heating rate 6 °C/min) in flowing air for 4 hours. The catalyst precursors were sulfided at 350 °C (heating rate 6 °C/min) for two hours in H₂/H₂S 9:1 (Scott), in a flow of 60 ml/min STP at a total pressure of 1 bar or 30 bar. The samples sulfided at 1 bar are referred to as NiMoS₂, CoMoS₂, and MoS₂, while the Co-promoted sample sulfided at 30 bar is referred to as CoMoS₂-30. After preparation, each sample was collected in a glass vial, which was filled with N₂ and sealed airtight for transportation.

2.2. Exposure to ambient air

The vials containing the sulfidic catalysts were opened in an Ar-filled glovebox (concentrations of H₂O and O₂ < 1 ppm), after which the samples were mounted on TEM grids as described below. After the first quasi-in-situ TEM study of the samples, without any exposure to air, the samples on the TEM grids were left on an office desk in a small non-airtight plastic box, to prevent accumulation of dust but to allow exposure to ambient air. This procedure is very similar to the storage of larger samples of catalyst in containers on a shelf, and is different from passivation. For passivation, a material is first exposed to a low, controlled, concentration of oxygen *before* being exposed to ambient air. For many materials this creates a protective oxide layer that prevents further oxidation and can be removed by mild reduction.

2.3. Characterization of catalysts

Quasi-in-situ TEM was carried out using an FEI monochromated Tecnai F20ST/STEM electron microscope, operated at an accelerating voltage of 200 keV, in bright field TEM mode. Images were obtained using a Gatan Ultrascan CCD camera (4k x 4k).

The vials containing the prepared samples were opened in an Ar-filled glovebox (concentrations of H₂O and O₂ < 1 ppm), after which the samples were crushed in n-hexane using a mortar and pestle, creating a suspension. A few drops of the suspension were placed on a Quantifoil® microgrid-carbon-film-covered mixed mesh Au TEM grid and, after evaporation of the solvent at room temperature, the grid was placed in a protective atmosphere transfer TEM specimen holder¹⁸. This holder was inserted into the glovebox via an air-lock. The holder was then closed (the sample compartment is sealed by a Viton O-ring), removed from the glovebox air-lock, and transferred to the TEM for imaging. Once inserted in the TEM air-lock, one three-minute pumping cycle was started while the holder was still closed, and the sample compartment of the holder was opened at the beginning of a second three-minute pumping cycle.

Samples were imaged quasi-in-situ (t=0, without exposure to air), after 24 h of exposure to air (t=24 h), and after 1 month in air (t=1 month). The CoMoS₂-30-sample was also imaged after 5 minutes in air (t=5 min). The average slab length of each sample was determined for quantitative analysis. Qualitative analysis was made possible by imaging identical regions of the samples at the different points in time. To investigate possible effects of the high-energy electron beam on the sample, also control images of sample regions that had not been exposed to the electron beam before were recorded and analyzed.

The resulting images were analyzed using Gatan Digital Micrograph and ImageJ software. After identifying the slabs, the length of each slab was measured by hand using standard drawing tools in the software. Per sample, around 800 individual slabs were measured at $t=0$. Due to the detrimental effect of ambient air on the slabs, at $t=24$ h about 450 slabs per sample were left for analysis, while after 1 month in air only around 300 slabs were left for analysis in the same regions of the samples that had been studied before.

The same samples were analyzed with XPS using a Kratos AXIS Ultra spectrometer, equipped with a monochromatic X-ray source and a delay-line detector (DLD). To prevent contact with air, samples were transferred from the glovebox to the XPS in a closed, homemade transfer holder under N_2 atmosphere. Spectra were recorded using an aluminum anode ($Al\ K\alpha = 1486.6$ eV). Survey scans were measured at constant pass energy of 160 eV and region scans at 40 eV. The background pressure was $2 \cdot 10^{-9}$ mbar.

XP spectra were fitted with CasaXPS (version 2.3.16) by a non-linear least-squares fitting algorithm using mixed Gaussian-Lorentzian (35/65) curves. Shirley background subtraction was applied and the energy was calibrated using the Al 2p peak at 74.6 eV as a reference. The Mo 3d spectrum was fitted with Mo^{4+} (MoS_2), Mo^{5+} (MoS_xO_y) and Mo^{6+} (MoO_3) contributions, as well as with the overlapping S 2s (~ 226.5 eV) component. The Ni 2p and Co 2p spectra were fitted with a sulfidic M^{2+} contribution and an oxidic M^{2+} contribution (NiO, CoO). The sulfidic contribution was assigned to Ni or Co sulfides, either dispersed on the edges of MoS_2 particles or present as bulk metal sulfides (Ni_3S_2 , Co_9S_8). Lastly, the S^{2-} and bridged S_2^{2-} anions, as well as sulfate (SO_4^{2-}), were taken into account for fitting the S 2p spectra. The XPS fitting procedure is

explained in more detail in a recent paper¹⁹ The respective binding energies of these components are listed in Table 1 and agree well with previously reported studies²⁰⁻²².

| | | | | | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Species | Mo⁴⁺ (MoS₂) | Mo⁵⁺ (MoS_xO_y) | Mo⁶⁺ (MoO₃) | S²⁻ (MS_x) | S²⁻ (MS_x) |
| BE (eV)^a | 229.0 | 231.2 | 232.7 | 161.7 | 163.2 |
| ΔBE (eV)^b | 3.15 | 3.15 | 3.15 | 1.15 | 1.15 |
| | | | | | |
| Species | S⁶⁺ (SO₄²⁻) | Co²⁺ (CoS_x)^c | Co²⁺ (CoO)^c | Ni²⁺ (NiS_x)^c | Ni²⁺ (NiO)^c |
| BE (eV)^a | 168.8 | 778.7 | 791.8 | 853.8 | 856.5 |
| ΔBE (eV)^b | 1.15 | - | - | - | - |

Table 1: XPS binding energies of the various species present in (Co/Ni)MoS₂, as determined by the fitting procedure described in the text.

^a Binding energy of the 3d_{5/2} or 2p_{3/2} peak. Uncertainty ± 0.2 eV.

^b ΔBE(3d) = BE(3d_{3/2}) – BE(3d_{5/2}), ΔBE(2p) = BE(2p_{1/2}) – BE(2p_{3/2}).

^c Only the 2p_{3/2} peak was fitted for Co and Ni.

3. Results & Discussion

3.1. Imaging & Slab length analysis

A set of representative TEM images of the NiMoS₂ sample is shown in Figure 1, where the same γ -Al₂O₃ particle covered with NiMoS₂ slabs was imaged before any exposure to air, after 24h in air and after 1 month of exposure to air. It is immediately apparent that exposure to air leads to a decrease in the total number of visible slabs. For example, the slab that is indicated in the encircled region labeled '1' is present at t=0, but has disappeared at t=24 h. There are several other slabs that are present in the first image, but are no longer visible after the sample has been exposed to ambient air. The second indication that the sample was affected by air is that the observed average length of the slabs is decreasing. The stack of multiple slabs in the encircled region labeled '2' is an example of this phenomenon. At t=0, the stack consists of three slabs of approximately equal length. The length of the slabs decreases significantly upon exposure to air. It can also be noted that the substrate that carries the slabs seems to be changing simultaneously. Although this is not clearly visible in TEM imaging, the substrate material that supports the visible slabs does not consist solely of γ -Al₂O₃. It is actually γ -Al₂O₃ covered with more NiMoS₂ slabs that are oriented non-parallel with respect to the TEM electron beam and thus not clearly visible as slabs. Due to the planar layered structure of MoS₂, the only slabs that will be visible in the TEM two-dimensional projection are those that are oriented parallel, or slightly tilted (\pm several degrees) with respect to the electron beam²³. As all NiMoS₂ slabs are influenced by ambient air, also the slabs that are not directly visible are changing. The result of this process is observed as changes in general morphology of the material surrounding and supporting the

visible slabs, which is for example visible when comparing the edge structure of the particle in Figure 1 at the different stages of oxidation.

For the CoMoS_2 , $\text{CoMoS}_2\text{-30}$, and MoS_2 samples, similar trends are found, with less and apparently shorter slabs being observed. All samples show slabs decreasing both in length as well as in number after exposure to air.

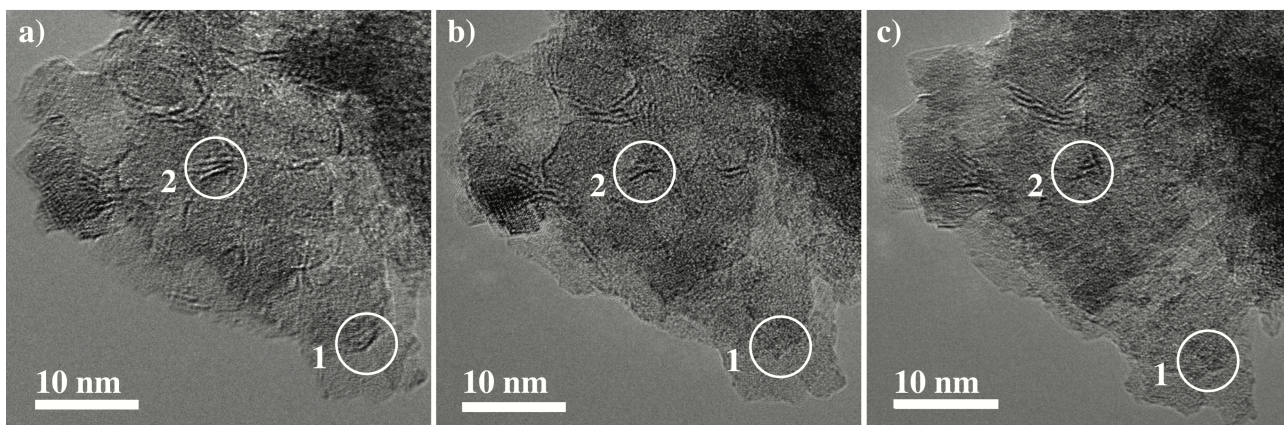


Figure 1: TEM images of a $\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$ particle covered with NiMoS_2 catalyst slabs, a) prior to air exposure, b) after 24 h of exposure to air, and c) after 1 month in ambient air. Several catalyst slabs have disappeared after air exposure. The region labeled ‘1’ shows a slab that has completely disappeared after 24 h of air exposure, while the region labeled ‘2’ shows a stack of which the slabs have become shorter over time.

However, solely based on observations of a small number of slabs, no conclusions can be drawn. As the sample grid is taken out of the sample holder in between the measurements, it might occur that a slab that was visible in the $t=0$ measurement is no longer visible during the $t=24$ h or $t=1$ month measurement, due to a slight rotation of a part of the material. The opposite process might also occur, resulting in slabs appearing that were not visible before. Therefore, quantitative slab

length analysis based on a large set of images is required. In this way, the random process of slabs appearing or disappearing due to changes in carrier material and observation angle will be averaged out.

For statistical analysis of the changes of the samples upon contact to air, all recorded images were analyzed and the lengths of all visible slabs were measured. For the NiMoS₂ sample, the t=0 measurement yielded 761 measured slabs, while the images of the same areas of the sample obtained after 24 h of air exposure showed 631 slabs for analysis. After 1 month in air, 585 slabs remained visible. The distribution of the recorded slab lengths is plotted as a histogram in Figure 2a. The slab length distribution changes significantly after exposure to air. At t=0, the slab length distribution is more evenly distributed over slab lengths between 1 and 3 nm, with a long tail stretching to 4.5 nm. At t=24 h, the distribution of the histogram has mostly shifted to the regime between 1 and 2 nm, with a peak around 1.3 nm. This process continues during the 1 month of exposure to air, as is visible in the t=1 month histogram. The number of slabs shorter than 1 nm has increased significantly, while the tail of the histogram decreases further. As the slabs get shorter, slabs that were initially relatively short (< 1 nm) disappear completely, explaining the decrease in the total number of observable slabs. The stacking degree of the slabs was also determined, resulting in an average stacking of 1.3 layers, which remained constant after exposure to air. Analysis of the other samples was performed in the same way, resulting in the histograms shown in Figure 2 b-d. All samples show similar trends in slab length distribution, indicating that all samples are affected by exposure to air in a similar way, including the reference sample of unpromoted MoS₂ (Figure 2c).

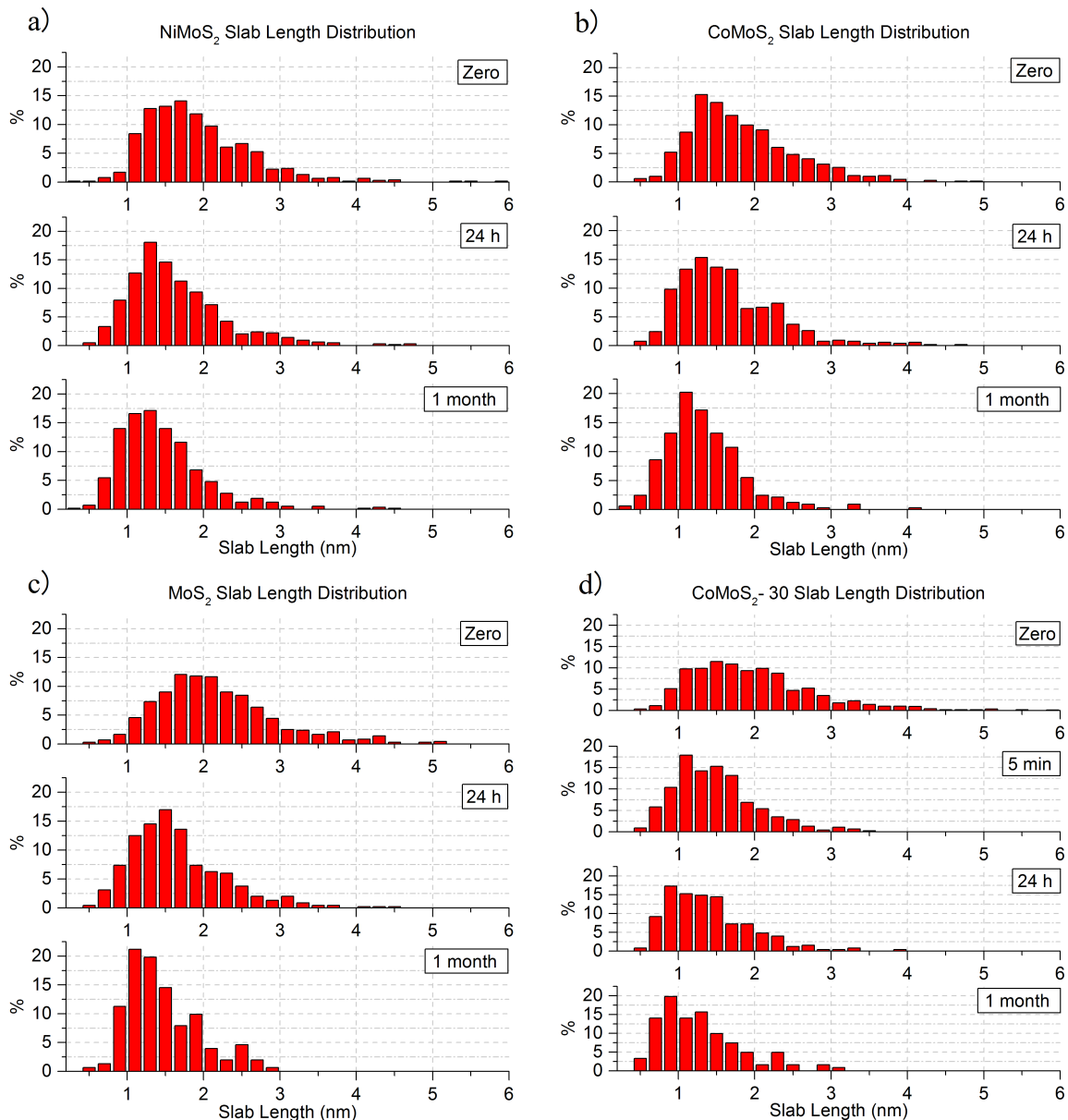


Figure 2: Sets of histograms showing the slab length distribution of the samples, for a) NiMoS₂, b) CoMoS₂, c) MoS₂, and d) CoMoS₂-30. Each set of histograms shows the evolution of the slab length distribution as a function of air exposure time (from t=0 to t=1 month). Each sample starts with a broad slab length distribution at t=0 and exhibits a change to a narrower distribution with mainly shorter slabs remaining after 1 month of exposure to air.

When comparing CoMoS₂ to CoMoS₂-30 bar, some differences are visible. The initial slab length distribution at t=0 shows a broader distribution for the 30 bar sulfided sample. At t=5 min, a shift is already visible in the distribution of the histogram, which indicates that only 5 minutes of exposure to air has an effect on the slabs. The distribution continues to shift after extended exposure to air. The calculated average slab lengths are shown in Table 2. Although CoMoS₂-30 initially has a slightly higher average slab length value than the 1 bar sulfided CoMoS₂ sample, after exposure to air for 1 month the average slab lengths of both samples have decreased to similar values. The average slab length of CoMoS₂-30 decreased faster than that of CoMoS₂. The average slab stacking degree was also determined for each sample, yielding similar values for all samples: around 1.3 ± 0.1 layers per cluster. These values remained constant during air exposure.

Table 2: Average slab length (l) of each sample, including the control data (of parts of the sample that had not been exposed to the electron beam before).

| Sample | NiMoS ₂ avg. l (nm) | CoMoS ₂ avg. l (nm) | CoMoS ₂ - 30 bar avg. l (nm) | MoS ₂ avg. l (nm) |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Zero | 1.91 | 1.83 | 1.98 | 2.16 |
| 5 min. in air | | | 1.48 | |
| 24h in air | 1.65 | 1.64 | 1.39 | 1.66 |
| Control 24h | 1.80 | 1.76 | 1.55 | 1.78 |
| 1 month in air | 1.45 | 1.33 | 1.29 | 1.46 |
| Control 1 month | --- | 1.52 | 1.37 | 1.76 |

When plotting the average slab length values per sample as a function of air exposure time, it is clear that all samples were affected (Figure 3). All samples showed a significant decrease in average slab length. Average slab length values were also determined from control images, obtained from areas that had not been exposed to the TEM electron beam before. The data are shown in Table 2. The $t=0$ measurements did not require control data, as for these data the sample was exposed to the electron beam for the first time. Although NiMoS_2 $t=24$ h control data were inadvertently not obtained, the data show a clear trend. Slabs in areas that had not yet been exposed to the electron beam also decreased in length, but at a somewhat lower rate. This indicates that exposure to the electron beam had a minor accelerating contribution to the process of slab deterioration.

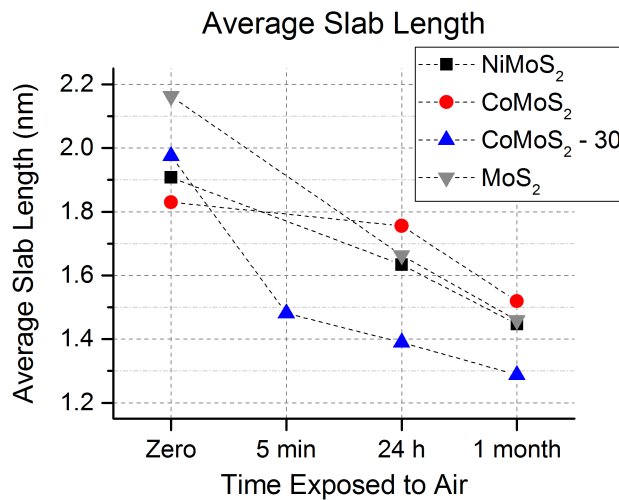


Figure 3: Average slab length of all (Ni/Co)MoS₂ samples, as a function of air exposure time.

3.2. XPS

In order to obtain detailed information concerning the composition of the catalyst at the different stages of air exposure during the experiments, we performed X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy. Figure 4 shows the acquired XP spectra of the catalyst samples, demonstrating the change in atomic composition as a function of air exposure time. At $t=0$, approximately 80% of Mo and Ni and 90% of Co was present as the respective metal sulfides. All sulfur was present as sulfidic sulfur (S^{2-} and S_2^{2-}). For $CoMoS_2$, sulfidation at 30 bar slightly increased the fractions of MoS_2 and Co sulfide compared with sulfidation at 1 bar. Upon brief exposure to air (5 minutes), no oxidation of Mo or S was apparent in the XP spectra, whereas slight oxidation (approximately 10%) of the Ni/Co promoter atoms could be observed after deconvolution of the XP spectra in the promoted catalysts. After an additional 24 hours of exposure to air, approximately 15% of Mo, 6% of S, 39% of Ni and 24% of Co was oxidized compared with the freshly sulfided catalysts at $t=0$. Oxidation of the Mo and S species occurred at approximately the same rates, in both the promoted and unpromoted samples. The promoted catalysts were most prone to oxidation as the Ni and Co atoms oxidized first. The oxidation of Co leveled off after 24 hours of exposure to air, whereas Ni oxidation was an on-going process. After 1 month of exposure to air, all catalysts showed significant oxidation of all elements. Even sulfur, which oxidized more slowly than the other elements, was significantly oxidized after 1 month of exposure to air. The observed sequence of oxidation over time was: Ni/Co > Mo > S. The data depicted in Figure 4 are listed in Table S1 in the Supporting Information.

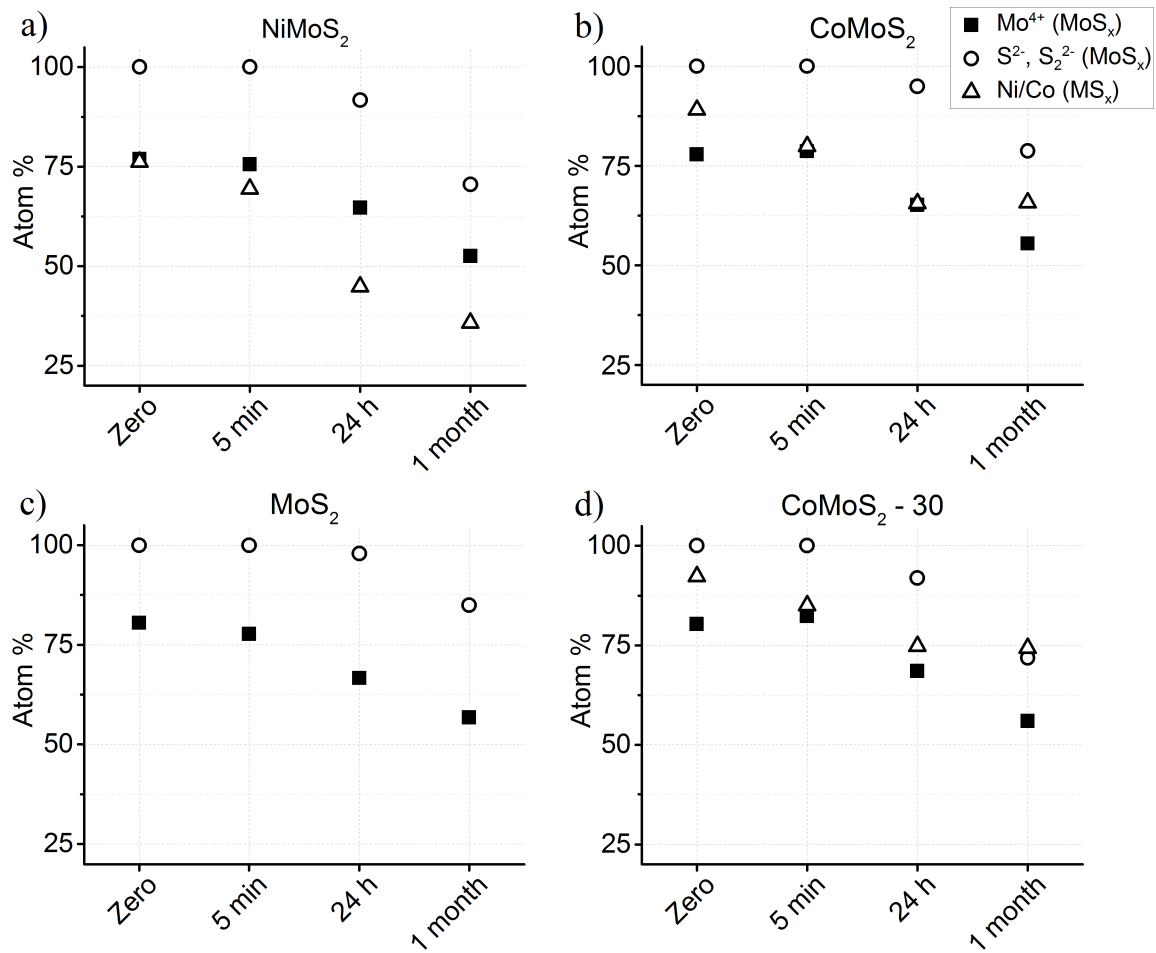


Figure 4: Composition (in atom %, as determined by deconvolution of XP spectra) of the samples a) NiMoS₂, b) CoMoS₂, c) MoS₂, and d) CoMoS₂-30, prior to exposure to air, after 5 minutes, after 24 hours, and after 1 month of exposure to air. The fraction of sulfided species was calculated from the contributions of MoS₂ (Mo⁴⁺), sulfide anions (S²⁻ and S₂²⁻) and sulfided Ni/Co (either as M-MoS₂ or as MS_x) to the respective XP spectra.

The Ni 2p, Mo 3d, and S 2p XP spectra of NiMoS₂ are plotted in Figure 5 and are representative for all catalysts exposed to air. The XP spectra for the other samples are included in the SI (figures S2, S3, and S4). Oxidation of the MoS₂-phase was evident from the appearance of a

peak at 235.9 eV in Figure 5b, which can be ascribed to Mo^{6+} , as in MoO_3 ($3d_{3/2}$). The formation of NiO was shown by the peak at 856.5 eV appearing in the Ni 2p spectrum (Figure 5a) as well as by the appearance of satellite features at ~ 862 eV (Ni $2p_{3/2}$) and ~ 880 eV (Ni $2p_{1/2}$). In agreement with these observations, a peak at 168.8 eV appeared in the S 2p spectrum Figure 5c, indicative of the formation of sulfates. After 1 month of exposure to air, increased oxidation was observed in all spectra.

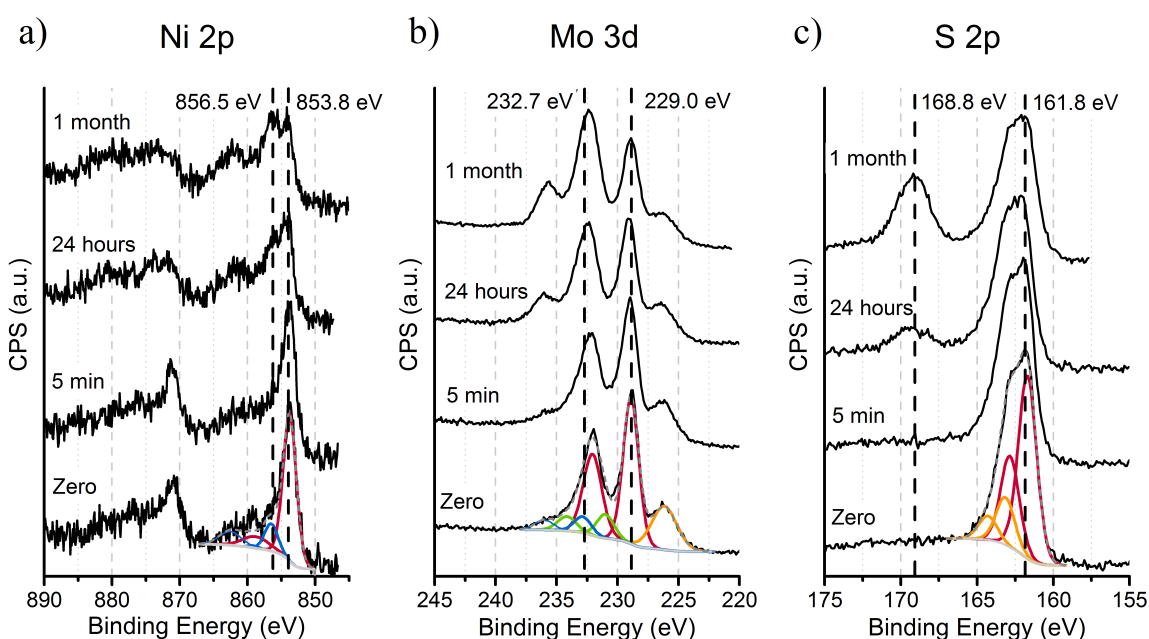


Figure 5: XP spectra of NiMoS_2 , showing a) the Ni 2p, b) the Mo 3d, and c) the S 2p signals, prior to exposure to air, after 5 minutes, 24 h, and 1 month of exposure to air. The binding energies (BE) of sulfided species (lower BE) and oxidized species (higher BE) are indicated by the dotted lines. The deconvolution is also shown: For a) Ni 2p: NiS_x = red, NiO_x = blue (both include satellites); for b) Mo 3d: Mo(IV) = red, Mo(V) = green, Mo(VI) = blue, for S 2s = orange; for c) S 2p: S^{2-} = red, S_2^{2-} = orange; and overall: background = light grey, fit is grey dashed, data is black.

3.3. Proposed oxidation mechanism

On the basis of the obtained TEM data alone, it is not easy to go beyond the slab-length analysis presented above and draw additional conclusions, e.g. about the atomic structure, location and orientation of the new species that were formed during exposure to air. Combining the TEM observations with the XP spectra, we can however draw further conclusions.

Exposure to air leads to oxidation of the samples, as is indicated by the XP spectra shown in Figures 4 & 5. The oxidation initiates at the Ni/Co promoter atoms, and continues with the oxidation of Mo after prolonged exposure to air. As is visible in the TEM micrographs, the slabs disappear from the sides of the particle towards the center. In various other studies, it has been shown that MoS₂-catalyzed reactions occur on the edges of the MoS₂ crystals, supported on a variety of materials^{4,24-28}. The catalytically active species are the metal atoms located at the edges of the slabs. The oxide species that are formed there (MoO₃, oxysulfides) have no planar crystal structure^{14,23}, hence the edges of the slabs disappear in the TEM-images, enabling us to observe a change in slab length.

The suggestion that oxidation of the slabs starts from the edge is also supported by the XPS data, which show the initial oxidation, during the first 5 minutes of exposure to air, to occur at the Ni/Co promoter atoms, to form NiO_x/CoO_x. This is however not conclusive on its own, as it has not been indisputably shown that the promoter atoms in (Ni/Co)MoS₂, supported on γ -Al₂O₃, are located on the edges of the MoS₂ slabs, as was shown in various other studies of (Ni/Co)MoS₂ on different supports (e.g. Au single crystal surfaces, or graphite)²⁹⁻³². Also, the initial Ni/Co oxidation XPS signal could, at least partially, originate from the oxidation of Ni/Co atoms that were not incorporated in the (Ni/Co)MoS₂ slabs, but were contained in other species on the

sample, such as Ni/Co-sulfides³⁰. This suggestion is also supported by the fact that γ -Al₂O₃-supported Co-sulfides oxidize more readily than γ -Al₂O₃-supported MoS₂³³.

The scale of the horizontal axes in the graphs that show the evolution of the samples as a function of air exposure time Figures 3 & 4 is close to logarithmic. The approximately linear curves in these plots indicate an exponential decrease in average slab length. On average, during the first 24 h of air exposure, the average slab length of all samples decreased with 20%. After one more month in air, the decrease had continued up to an average decrease of 30%. As the oxidation rate was initially high but then exponentially slowed down, the process appeared to be self-limiting. This could indicate that when the edges of the (Ni/Co)MoS₂-slabs were oxidized, the formed oxide species remained at the support around the slab, thereby shielding the inner MoS₂-species from oxidative attacks by incoming oxygen molecules, as was proposed by Yoshimura et al. in 1991³³. As the basal planes of the slabs are known to be inactive^{34,35}, the oxide ring would only be formed at the edges. When this oxide ring around the slab grew thicker, further oxidation of the remaining slab occurred at a progressively lower rate. This mechanism also explains the slightly accelerating effect of the electron beam on the oxidation process, given in Table 2. The accelerating effect could be due to the fact that the beam might be able to (slowly) partly disintegrate the protective ring, allowing further oxidation to occur on the slabs that have been imaged multiple times. To prove this hypothesis additional measurements would be required however, e.g. using STEM or STM on flat model systems, to localize and visualize the formed oxide species. This hypothesis also explains why the method of oxygen titration / chemisorption does not give quantitative results for the number of active sites:³⁶ the sites are being changed by the adsorbed oxygen.

As for the catalytic application of these materials, it is important to know what happens upon resulfidation after oxidation (whether uncontrolled as for the current samples or controlled as after passivation). We are presently studying the resulfidation of these types of catalysts in a similar way.

5. Conclusion

Ni/Co-promoted and unpromoted MoS₂ catalyst particles, dispersed on a γ -Al₂O₃ substrate, are not stable in ambient air. TEM imaging reveals that on average, the length of the (Ni/Co)MoS₂-slabs decreases as a function of air exposure time. Even five minutes exposure to ambient air already significantly decreases the average slab length. XPS shows that the samples are being oxidized. Oxidation of the catalyst slabs occurs from the edges towards the center of the slab, after which the formed oxide species probably remain around the slab. These remaining oxide species might form a ring-like barrier structure around the inner MoS₂-species, shielding these inner species from oxidation, and explaining the exponential decay of the process.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO/OCW) as part of the Frontiers of NanoScience (NanoFront) program.

We would like to thank prof.dr. H.W. Zandbergen and dr.ir. F.D. Tichelaar for their support in using the TEM hardware.

Supporting Information

Contents:

Table S1, containing the XPS data as graphically shown in Figure 4.

Figure S2, **Figure S3**, and **Figure S4**, showing the XP spectra of CoMoS₂, CoMoS₂ - 30 bar, and MoS₂, respectively, as a function of air exposure time.

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Table of Contents Image

