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PROBLEMS OF RECYCLING COMPOSITE MATERIALS USED IN THE AVIATION INDUSTRY

Seredenko V.V.,
Senior lecturer of the Department of "Composite Structures and Aviation Materials Science"
M.Ye. Zhukovsky National Aerospace University "Kharkiv Aviation Institute"

The aviation industry has increasingly adopted composite materials, particularly carbon fiber-reinforced polymers (CFRP) and glass fiber-reinforced polymers (GFRP), due to their superior strength-to-weight ratio, durability, and fuel efficiency. However, the disposal and recycling of composite materials pose significant environmental and logistical challenges. This thesis investigates the problems surrounding the recycling of composite materials used in the aviation industry, focusing on the technical, economic, and environmental issues. It explores existing recycling methods, their limitations, and potential innovative solutions that can mitigate the impact of composite waste while promoting sustainable practices within aviation manufacturing and disposal.

The use of composite materials, particularly CFRP, has revolutionized the aviation industry by offering lightweight yet strong materials that contribute to improved fuel efficiency and performance. Composites are increasingly used in critical aircraft components such as wings, fuselages, and tail assemblies. However, these materials present significant challenges when they reach the end of their life cycle, as their unique chemical and physical properties make them difficult to recycle.

Despite the growing reliance on composite materials in aviation, their recycling remains a complex issue. Current recycling technologies are inefficient, costly, and often fail to produce high-quality recycled materials. The growing volume of composite waste, coupled with regulatory pressures for sustainable practices, necessitates an urgent focus on developing more effective recycling methods.

Recycling Methods for Composite Materials

– Mechanical recycling involves the grinding of composite waste into smaller particles. While this method is simple and relatively low-cost, it often results in a significant loss of material properties, making it unsuitable for high-performance applications like those in aviation.

– Thermal recycling methods involve the use of heat to break down the resin matrix of composite materials, separating it from the fibers. However, these methods face challenges such as the risk of damaging the fibers and the need for high-energy input.

– Chemical recycling uses solvents or other chemical agents to degrade the resin and recover the fibers. This method has shown promise in some cases but is limited by the difficulty of finding cost-effective, scalable solutions.

– Solvolysis involves using specific solvents at elevated temperatures to dissolve the resin without damaging the fibers. While this technique offers potential for high-quality fiber recovery, it remains expensive and complex to scale.

– Innovative Recycling Approaches such as:

1. Enzymatic Recycling: Utilizing enzymes to break down composite materials.
2. Cryogenic Recycling: Using low temperatures to fracture composites without degrading the fibers.
3. Recycling through Additive Manufacturing: Recycling composite waste into 3D printing filament for creating new components.

The disposal of composite materials in landfills or through incineration contributes to significant environmental pollution. Composites are not biodegradable and can persist in the environment for hundreds of years.

The recycling process itself has an environmental footprint. For instance, thermal and chemical recycling methods require significant energy input, which may offset some of the environmental benefits of using composites in the first place.

A comprehensive life cycle analysis (LCA) can provide insights into the environmental benefits and drawbacks of using composite materials versus traditional materials like aluminum. It also helps assess the impact of recycling efforts on the overall sustainability of aviation manufacturing.

Solutions to the problems of recycling composite materials:

The aviation industry faces significant challenges in recycling composite materials due to technical, economic, and environmental factors. While current recycling technologies show promise, they are not yet cost-effective or scalable enough for widespread use in aviation. The industry needs to explore new innovations and collaborate on developing more sustainable solutions.

Further research into alternative recycling methods, including solvolysis and enzymatic recycling, holds promise for improving material recovery. Industry-wide collaboration and the adoption of circular economy principles can facilitate the development of more efficient and sustainable recycling systems.

The transition to more sustainable recycling practices is essential for the future of aviation. By improving composite recycling, the industry can reduce its environmental impact, support green manufacturing practices, and align with global sustainability goals.

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