

Survey Report

subject: Signal processing on metal oxide gas sensors to estimate the indoor carbon dioxide concentration on the example of IDT's ZMOD4410 gas sensor module

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Report

Metal oxide gas sensors (MOX-GS) are applied extensively to characterize indoor air quality (IAQ). This indoor air quality is influenced by a variety of parameters such as concentrations of volatile organic compounds (VOC) and carbon dioxide (CO₂) to address the most important gases [1]. To sum up all individual occurring VOC without discrimination the term “total volatile organic compounds” (TVOC) was introduced. The TVOC concentration in indoor air environments depends on human activities, evaporations from furniture, floor covers and equipment as well as from the air exchanged by conditioning or aeration [2]. Since TVOC and CO₂ are breath gas components, their temporal courses in populated rooms shows specific gradients. If more “exotic indoor environments” like green houses, indoor pools, industrial environment, laboratories, wine cellars and others are excluded, only TVOC can be emitted at significant rates from immobile sources.

Since CO₂ is the gas component with the most extensive knowledge on its impacts on human feeling and health, automatic control systems for indoor air quality are designed increasingly to use this CO₂ concentration as the reference input [3]. Although MOX-GS are not able to measure CO₂ directly, increasing efforts are observable in the last years to use their signals as reference input for air conditioning or aeration systems as well [4]. The motivation for this development comes with their availability as highly reliable, miniaturized and economic sensors and the fact that indoor air quality is governed to a considerable extent also by TVOC, which can be measured directly with MOX-GS. Furthermore, it is discussed intensively in the sensor community if it is possible to derive an estimated value for the CO₂ concentration (eCO₂) from the signals from MOX-GS [5] by intelligent signal processing. Taking all above-mentioned facts into account, such a processing can indeed provide a trustable eCO₂ value, if the following preconditions are fulfilled:

1. The indoor environment contains no other significant source of CO₂ than human breath.
2. There is a resilient correlation between TVOC and CO₂ exhaled by humans.
3. TVOC, emitted by other sources than humans can be considered in the algorithm, for instance by a subtraction from the signals as an offset.

The first precondition can be easily observed and maintained in most indoor environments.

To find out to which extend the second precondition is valid in offices, meeting rooms and other suited indoor environments large studies were carried out. They prove that CO₂ is emitted by humans without physical or mental workout at a rate around 0.25 L/min [6] and that the rate of the emitted TVOC is more than 2 orders of magnitude smaller and differs strongly between persons, during daytime and can increase during and after physical workout [7, 8]. Furthermore, a baseline level of TVOC is observable which can be correlated to the mass of a healthy person. Therefore, postulating a constant relationship between the exhaled CO₂ and TVOC of a single person seems to be possible only on very short time scales of several minutes. But studies show that individual fluctuations of that relationship and variations between different persons are canceling out each other in a way that indeed a pattern for the TVOC/CO₂ relationship can be established if more than one person stays in the environment to be controlled [9].

The simplest form of that relationship is a linear one, described by the following equation:

$$c(\text{CO}_2) = a + b \cdot c(\text{TVOC}) \quad (1)$$

with:

- $c(\text{CO}_2)$ = CO₂ concentration
- $c(\text{TVOC})$ = TVOC concentration
- a = additive constant ranging at around 400 vol.-ppm CO₂ in pollutant-free outdoor air
- b = factor between exhaled CO₂ and TVOC

The third condition is difficult to establish, since a great variety of temporal and permanent TVOC sources can occur in indoor environments. One possibility to address this problem is the analyzes of the TVOC release rate of these sources: Furniture, floor covers and other immobile TVOC sources cause relatively long-term stable base concentrations of TVOC which can be considered, when the MOX-GS base line is established after turning them on. Temporal sources like burning candles or deodorants lead to an increase of TVOC concentration, which is significantly faster than that caused by human breathing. Taking these phenomena into account it seems therefore reasonable to use also temporal signal gradients as inputs for algorithms for estimating CO₂ concentration from TVOC concentration.

The company Integrated Device Technology (IDT) develops, produces and sells MOX-GS for several years. To enlarge their possible applications an algorithm for estimating CO₂ concentration for MOX-GS was developed and patented by IDT. This algorithm is based on the following considerations for ZMOD4410:

1. The eCO₂ value is calculated by the linear equation (1) from the TVOC concentration, where the constant a was set to 400 vol.-ppm.
2. The TVOC concentration measured by the MOX-GS is corrected by the algorithm by subtracting constant base levels and temporal increases which are much faster than could be caused by human breathing.
3. The maximum CO₂ concentration found in common indoor environments at any circumstances cannot exceed 5000 vol.-ppm. If the algorithm leads to higher concentrations, the values are cut back to this upper limit.

IDT carried out long-term tests in offices and meeting rooms by installing several MOX-GS ZMOD4410 together with infrared CO₂ sensors MX1102 (Onset Computer Corporation) in a closed vicinity to each other. From the results the constant b of equation 1 and the limits of temporal gradients of TVOC increase, which describe those caused by human breathing, were adjusted. As expected, the results also indicate that these parameters depend also on the size of the room to be controlled. Therefore, IDT can optimize the parameters after preliminary tests in a customer application. The tests carried out at IDT indoor environments proved so far, that it is possible to calculate eCO₂ values from MOX-GS signals with a deviation of less than 30 % of the measuring range.

KSI has inspected the measurement locations at IDT and checked the hardware used. Furthermore, KSI investigated the IDT algorithm in detail. It can be concluded that no error sources or misleading signal corrections have been found. Data recording, processing and analyzes are well documented and comprehensible.

Summarizing the arguments above it is possible to estimate the actual indoor carbon dioxide concentration with IDT's ZMOD4410 sensor signals in case:

- No other carbon dioxide sources than breathing persons are in the room,
- Base lines and fast emitting TVOC sources are considered by taking temporal signal gradients into account and
- Fixing the lower and upper limit of estimated carbon dioxide to 400 and 5000 vol.-ppm respectively.

The efficiency and reliability of aeration systems using these eCO₂ values as reference input should not deviate significantly from those using values from infrared CO₂ monitors.

Within the last decades, KSI gained expertise on carbon dioxide measurements. Recently, a scientific book on CO₂ measuring principles was published on all related topics for carbon dioxide [10]. Although data from IDT ZMOD4410 gas sensor module are trustful, KSI will carry out a more intensive study on eCO₂ starting early 2019 using ZMOD4410 among others.

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