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Treatment of municipal solid waste landfill leachate by use of combined biological, physical and photochemical processes

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Abstract

The purpose of this work was to study the treatment of a leachate coming from the municipal solid waste landfill of Astana (Kazakhstan). Physical (stripping and adsorption), biological and photochemical processes were applied separately or in combination, and the treatment efficiency was attended in terms of carbon and nitrogen removal. The leachate carbon was by 45-60% inorganic while nitrogen was almost 100% inorganic in the form of ammonia. The results showed that inorganic carbon and ammonia can be almost entirely removed by air stripping at pH=7 and pH=12, respectively. The removal of organic carbon by stripping alone was lower than 4% but combined to adsorption reached 20%, and to biological treatment 30%. The removal of organic carbon by photochemical oxidation alone was 43%. The combination of stripping, adsorption and biological treatment resulted in 37% organic carbon and with the addition of photochemical oxidation step the removal was increased to 59%. In overall, TC removal reached 85% and TN removal almost 100%. The results showed that the decomposition of landfill leachate carbon is a challenging task requiring a combination of processes. On the

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contrary, as almost all nitrogen is inorganic, air stripping at elevated pH alone can sufficiently eliminate it.

Keywords: landfill leachate, activated sludge, leachate treatment, photo-Fenton.

1. Introduction

Despite the development of various solid waste management methods, sanitary landfilling remains the most widely used option for the disposal of municipal solid waste (MSW) [1]. Kazakhstan is not an exception including Astana, which is its capital city. At present, roughly 97% of the generated MSW in Astana is disposed at its MSW landfill [2]. The current MSW cell of Astana has been used since 2006 and has already exceeded its capacity. By the end of 2016, this cell had received over 4 million tons of MSW while its projected capacity was 3.2 million tons. An identical new cell is being built and it is anticipated to start accepting MSW from July of 2017, while the current cell is under re-cultivation process (2017).

These MSW disposal trends can be compared with those in East-European countries; for example, in Poland and Russian Federation, 90% and 95% of MSW are being landfilled, respectively [3, 4]. The highest generation rate of waste per capita in EU was reported for Denmark with a waste production rate of 799 kg/capita and the lowest in Poland with 286 kg/capita (2015). The corresponding figure for Astana regarding MSW generation was roughly 526 kg/capita in 2015, while this value was only 343 kg/capita in 2004. This growth of MSW rate could be explained by the increase of population and the rapid economic development of the city; the population of Astana city has increased from 327,000 in 1998 to 880,000 in 2016. As a result, the amount of residential buildings was increased from 139 million m² to 1760 million m² during the same period. It is evident that the increase in population, in residential and commercial buildings, and the growth of economic activities are accompanied by increased volumes of solid waste. The composition of MSW in Astana is presented in Table 1 [5].

MSW landfills generate biogas and leachate as by-products. The production of biogas and leachate occurs due to the biodegradation of the organic fraction in the waste. The compacted waste layers lead to anaerobic processes in young landfills followed by anaerobic processes in older landfills (Figure 1).

Table 1. Composition of MSW in Astana city [5].

MSW	Percentage (%)
Organic	28
Inert	12.4
Plastic	18.5
Paper	13
Metal	0.9
Textile and leather	9.8
Landscaping	1.5
Construction	1.4
Glass	14.5

Landfill leachate from municipal solid waste is a serious growing concern for both environmental and human health in urban areas [1, 6]. Landfill leachate is generally a dark colored liquid and contains several groups of pollutants such as organics (both biodegradable and refractory), nutrients, inorganic salts, heavy metals, high levels of total ammonium nitrogen and other toxic pollutants [1, 7, 8]. It is a wastewater with diverse composition, which exhibits a wide variation depending on the age, site hydrology, moisture and oxygen availability, and the degree of solid waste stabilization, as shown in Figure 1 [4, 9].

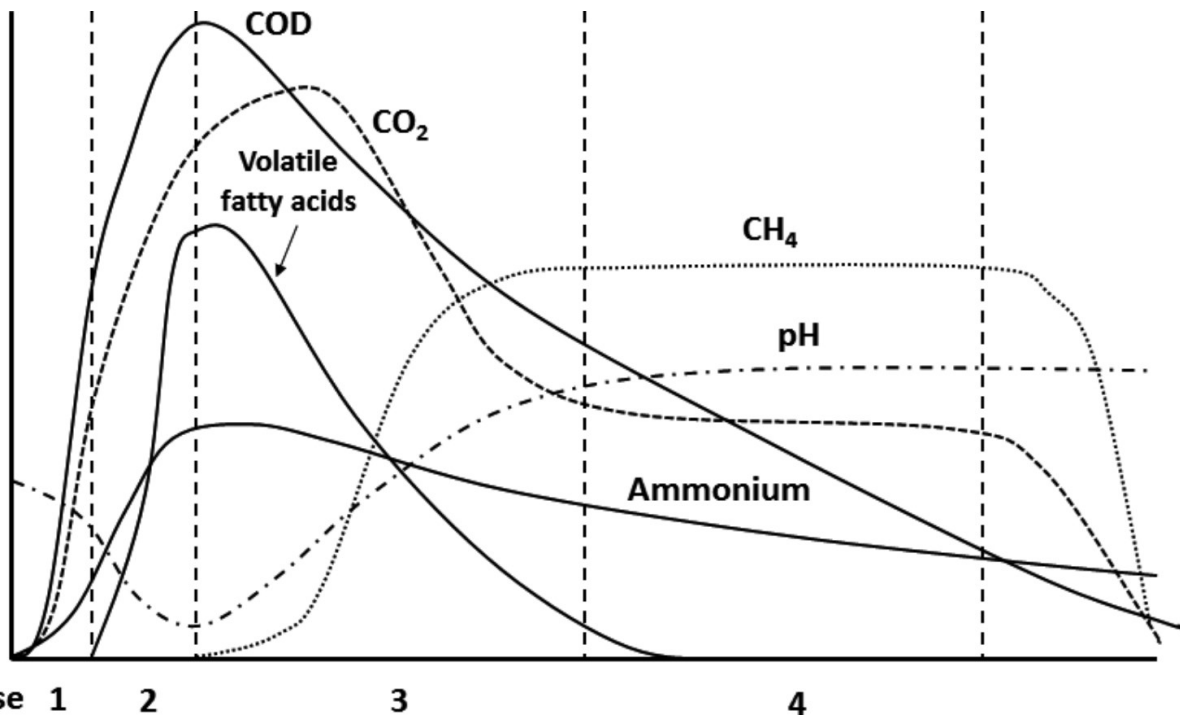


Figure 1. Scheme of biological treatment of leachate. 1 = aerobic phase; 2 = anaerobic acidogenic phase; 3 = unstable methanogenic phase; 4 = stable methanogenic phase. “Reprinted from Bove et al. [9] with permission from John Wiley and Sons”.

Thus, the composition of a leachate depends largely on its age. Young leachates are characterized by higher ratios of BOD/COD and higher amounts of volatile fatty acids, while an old leachate is expected to contain high amounts of total ammonium nitrogen and low ratios of BOD/COD [8] (Table 2). Astana landfill has been used for more than 10 years and thus, the leachate collected can be considered as old, and it is expected to contain highly stabilized organic compounds as well as high concentrations of ammonia.

Table 2. Composition of leachates as a function of landfill age [9, 10]

Parameter	Young	Medium	Old
Age (year)	<1	1-5	>5
pH	7.2±1.0	7.7±0.7	8.2±0.3
COD (mg/L)	24805±22982	5239±2618	2652±1786
BOD ₅ /COD	0.46±0.21	0.23±0.09	0.121±0.07
TOC/COD	<0.3	0.3-0.5	>0.5

TN (mg/L)	1665±1612	1421±416	1939±1715
NH ₄ -N (mg/L)	2162±1385	1070±285	1616±1557

Typical compositions of leachates around the world are shown in Table 3 [11-17]. Heavy metals' concentrations could also vary significantly depending on the factors noted above. Typical ranges of heavy metal concentrations found in landfill leachates are shown in Table 4 [7, 18-20]. Approximately 0.02% of the total heavy metals in a landfill are leached out in 30 years [7, 21, 22]. Apart from biochemical processes in landfills and the inherent water content of the waste, leachate is also generated by rainwater percolating through the waste layers [4, 6, 15]. In the case of Astana landfill, the precipitation and melting of snow accumulated during the winter period could also be an additional contributor to the leachate production rate. The production of leachate is continued through its operating life and also for several hundred years after re-cultivation of the cell [23]. The recirculation of leachate back to the landfill is a widely practiced treatment method due to its low cost [24]. The study of Rodriguez et al. [25] in an anaerobic pilot-plant reactor has showed a reduction trend for the COD with leachate recirculation. It has been reported that the recirculation of leachate reduces the time required for the stabilization [22]. It has to be noted that such a practice is rarely applied in the Astana's landfill.

Table 3. Composition and properties of landfill leachate

Authors →	Kjeldsen <i>et al.</i> [7]	Speer <i>et al.</i> [14]	Modin <i>et al.</i> [16]	Amaral <i>et al.</i> [26]			Trabelsi <i>et al.</i> [17]	Yaman <i>et al.</i> [15]	Robinson [11]	Mishra <i>et al.</i> [27]	El-Gohary <i>et al.</i> [28]	Dominguez <i>et al.</i> [29]	Alver <i>et al.</i> [30]	Ramires-Sosa <i>et al.</i> [13]
Location →	Ref. ²	North Bay, Ontario, Canada	Sweden	Brazil			Japan	Istanbul, Turkey	UK	Mumbai India	Giza Egypt	Leon Spain	Aksaray Turkey	Merida Mexico
Parameters (mg/L) ↓				20 y.o.	10 y.o.	5 y.o.								
pH	4.5-9	7.1 (±0.2)	7.6	7.8 (±0.3)	7.8 (±0.1)	7.5 (±0.8)	7.2	5.5-8.5	8.41	7.77	8.4	8.00	7.4	8.3
Alkalinity (mg C/L)		4242 (±280)	300 ³	2797 (±559)	6092 (±495)	5570 (±325)		8000-13000	1820				1165	
Conductivity (µS/cm)	2500-35000							30000-40000		22.99				
TS	2000-60000													19128 (±473)
TSS				321 (±222)	58 (±54)	37 (±10)		300-1500		1356	938.5	7258	582	357 (±33)
Total COD	140-152000	995 (±290)	560	1352 (±561)	2572 (±528)	2783 (±623)	181	11640-19475	1900	6444	15225	9612	26183	10434 (±441)
Soluble COD											13250			10217 (±400)
Total BOD ₅	20-57000		12	76 (±41)	168 (±43)	150 (±60)	228	3000-13000	7.6	3391	5710		17750	942 (±236)
Soluble TC														4975 (±360)
Soluble TOC	30-29000		150				194		776			1358		2808 (±197)
TN	14-2500 ⁴	535 (±214)	190	532 (±187)	1307 (±312)	1112 (±417)	427	3482-3548				517	1318	
Nitrate		<D.L. ⁵					3.33		1800		0.05	21		
Ammonium-N	50-2200						351	2599-2713						

² The ranges are based on Andreottola and Cannas [31], Chu *et al.* [32], Robinson [33], Ehrig [34], Ehrig [35], Ehrig [36], Garland and Mosher [37], Johansen and Carlson [38], Karstensen [39], Krug and Ham [40], Lu *et al.* [41], NaturvArdsverket [42], Owen and Manning [43], and Robinson and Mafis [44].

³ Alkalinity as CaCO₃

⁴ Organic nitrogen

⁵ <D.L. denotes concentration below the detection limit (3 mg/L)

Ammonia-N	740	515 (±29)		451 (±173)	1240 (±570)	793 (±374)				5208	447			
TP	0.1-23	3.0 (±1.7)	0.59	7.0 (±1.5)	12 (±0.7)	11 (±3.6)		14.8-25.1	7.83	82.36	48.2	34	31	
Chlorine	150-4500		780	1708 (±333)	2960 (±124)	2973 (±161)	744		3490	3584		2353	1805	2200
Sulfate	8-7750							5-500	165	854		39	379	

Table 4. Range of heavy metals concentrations in landfill leachates

Authors/ Locations →	Xie <i>et al.</i> [18]	Speer <i>et al.</i> [14]	Modin <i>et al.</i> [16]	Naveen <i>et al.</i> [12]			Robinson [11]	Baun and Christensen [20]	Kjeldsen <i>et al.</i> [7]	Barlaz <i>et al.</i> [19]
	Queensland , Australia	North Bay, Ontario, Canada	Sweden	Bangalore, India			England, United Kingdom	Ref. ⁶	Ref. ⁷	North America
Metals (mg/L) ↓	Landfill bioreactor leachate	Raw leachate	Untreated leachate	L1 ⁸	P4 ⁹	G5 ¹⁰	Not filtered	Landfill leachate	Landfill leachate	Bioreactor landfill leachate
Iron	8.64 (±0.25)	19.0(±14.6)	2.3	11.16	0.16	0.62	4.06	0.08-2100	3-5500	
Zinc	1.87 (±0.06)	0.5 (±0.3)	0.084	3	1	0.4	220	0.01-155	0.03- 1000	0-112
Copper	0.28 (±0.01)		0.034	0.151	BDL	BDL	4.76	0.0005-1.4	0.005- 10	0.003- 0.49
Lead	0.41 (±0.06)		0.00082	0.3	BDL	BDL	<0.5	0.0005-1.5	0.001-5	0-0.3
Nickel	0.78 (±0.02)		0.061	1.339	BDL	BDL	406	0.001-3.2	0.015- 13	
Arsenic	0.11 (±0.03)		0.022	BDL ¹¹			200	0.0005-1.6	0.01-1	0.005- 0.155
Silver				0.035	0.02 6	0.05 1				
Cadmium	0.00 (±0.00)		0.000027	0.035	BDL	BDL	<0.5	0.00002- 0.13	0.0001- 0.4	0-0.419
Cobalt	0.14 (±0.02)		0.012					0.001-0.95	0.005- 1.5	
Chromium	0.13 (±0.02)		0.039	0.021	BDL	BDL	639	0.0005-1.6	0.02-1.5	0-1.98
Strontium		1.7 (±0.2)	5.3							

It is evident thus that there is a variety of leachates with diverse compositions, which imposes the need to apply different treatment methods depending on the exact case [49]. For instance, it is easier to process young leachates in comparison with old ones. For a number of environmental and public health reasons, it is essential to investigate suitable landfill leachate treatment methods [50]. Wiszniowski *et al.* [51] categorized leachate treatment methods into two basic groups: a) chemical and physical treatment, b) biological treatment.

Physical-chemical methods are used to remove refractory and non-biodegradable substances, and also to improve biologically pre-treated stabilized leachates [4]. They are often applied as a pre-

⁶ From Kjeldsen and Christophersen [45], Krug and Ham [46], Clement and Thomas [47], Jorgensen and Kjeldsen [48], Robinson [33], Chu *et al.* [32], Ehrig [36], Ehrig [35], and Johansen and Carlson [38]

⁷ The ranges are based on Andreottola and Cannas [31], Chu *et al.* [32], Robinson [33], Ehrig [34], Ehrig [35], Ehrig [36], Garland and Mosher [37], Johansen and Carlson [38], Karstensen [39], Krug and Ham [40], Lu *et al.* [41], NaturvArdsverket [42], Owen and Manning [43], and Robinson and Mafis [44].

⁸ L1-landfill side (close to cell)

⁹ P4-pond

¹⁰ G5-open well

¹¹ BDL-Below detection limit

treatment step for fresh leachates prior to biological treatment, or as a post-treatment and purification step when biological oxidation is restricted due to the presence of bio-refractory compounds. The main techniques of physical treatment are air-stripping, membrane filtration, adsorption and sedimentation [52, 53], while chemical precipitation, coagulation-flocculation and chemical-electrochemical oxidation are the most common chemical treatment options [54, 55]. An alternative and cheap option, especially applicable in poor regions, is the treatment in constructed wetlands and variations of onsite anaerobic-aerobic lagoons. This method is essentially biological treatment and has been proven efficient under certain conditions and leachate characteristics [4].

Air stripping is a process of passing a large volume of air through the leachate to enhance mass transfer of undesirable substances from the liquid to gas phase [56]. The efficiency of air stripping can be significantly improved by increasing values of pH and temperature. Typically, air stripping is held at a pH 10-11 and in the temperature range of 60-70°C [4]. Air stripping generates gas emissions containing mainly carbon dioxide, ammonia and smaller amounts of VOCs that may contribute to air pollution or greenhouse effect if released without appropriate treatment. Adsorption is used to remove refractory organic compounds and ammonium nitrogen. The main adsorbent agents used are powdered or granulated activated carbons (AC) and zeolites. Their frequent application is owed to their highly porous structure and large surface areas, thermal stability, resistance to acids and bases, and high removal efficiency of organic and inorganic pollutants from leachates [57-59]. Activated carbons are usually applied as a step in the physicochemical treatment train or as a tertiary treatment to remove non-biodegradable substances. They may also adsorb non-biodegradable products (SMP) of microbial origin. Advanced Oxidation Processes (AOPs) have been also used to eliminate organic pollutants in landfill leachates [60]. For example, photocatalytic treatment under UV-irradiated TiO₂ suspension can oxidize natural products, such as glucose, ethanol, cellulose and others, and toxic chemicals like chlorinated hydrocarbons, into CO₂, H₂ and HCl end-products. Photo-assisted Fenton reaction (Fe(II)+H₂O₂) with UV light has been also applied to decrease up to 70% the COD of a landfill leachate [61].

Biological treatment (aerobic or/and anaerobic) is the most commonly used way to reduce organic substances in landfill leachates [49]. However, its activity decreases with increasing of landfill's age due to the fact that biodegradation of organic matter reduces over time and leachate becomes stabilized [8]. Aerobic treatment used alone in a sequencing batch reactor (SBR) resulted in a 99% N-NH₄ removal in about 30 days [62]. The anaerobic biological treatment was found to be more effective than the aerobic in terms of COD removal [63]. Moreover, anaerobic and aerobic steps can be combined in series for more efficient process; for instance, Kettunen et al. [64] achieved a COD removal of 80-90% and ammonium removal of 80%.

In most cases, however, a combination of methods is applied for the effective treatment of landfill leachates. For example, adsorption by means of activated carbon has been used in combination with bio-processes in a number of studies in order to enhance the removal of refractory organic compounds and nitrification [59, 65]. Park et al. [66] applied a combination of the biological method, adsorption, precipitation, flocculation and reverse osmosis, to achieve removal of organic compounds in a landfill leachate about 98%. Marttinen et al. [55] investigated the efficiency of ozonation, nanofiltration and air-stripping in removing COD, toxic compounds and ammonium as pretreatment stages in order to prevent the inhibition effects on biomass, while Steensen [67] applied chemical oxidation in the treatment of a leachate, which was pretreated by biological method, and non-biodegradable organic matter was reduced by ozone/fixed bed catalyst and UV/H₂O₂ techniques.

In the present work, the effectiveness of air stripping at different pH, adsorption by means of activated carbon (AC) and natural zeolite (NZ), biological treatment by use of recycled municipal activated sludge (RAS) and photo-oxidation process using UV/H₂O₂/Fe(III), for the treatment of landfill leachate was studied. The effect of processes' parameters was investigated and treatment effectiveness was monitored via pH, conductivity, Total Organic Carbon (TOC), Inorganic Carbon (IC), Total Nitrogen (TN) and dissolved ions of NH₄⁺, NO₂⁻ and NO₃⁻ measurements.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Experimental setup of the biological process

The experimental setup of the biological process consisted of 1L borosilicate beakers with a total operating volume of 0.6 L. Continuous stirring was applied using magnetic stirrer, and samples were aerated using air pumps and diffusers. Throughout the study, the amount of the leachate treated was 250 mL, which was subsequently diluted to final reactor volume of 600 mL with tap water or tap water and activated sludge (Table 5). The average TSS (Total Suspended Solids) of the bioreactors was 2.38 ± 0.03 g/L and the HRT (Hydraulic Retention Time) 1.5 days. The amount of substrate that was fed to the amount of biomass in the system (F/M ratio) was 1.16-1.25 kgTOC/kg TSS* d.

2.2 Landfill leachate and activated sludge samples

The leachate was sampled from the Municipal Solid Waste landfill of Astana city between September and October 2017. Samples were collected from the upper side of the leachate reservoir and kept at 4°C in sealed plastic containers. Due to the high total solids (TS) content, the leachate was left for sufficient time for solids to settle and the supernatant solution was used for the experiments. The activated sludge used was sampled weekly from the wastewater treatment plant “Astana Su Arnasy” (Astana, Kazakhstan). After sampling, it was aerated for 24 h before use.

2.4 Adsorbents

The zeolite used was clinoptilolite of purity 50-84% from Taldykorgan region, Kazakhstan. The particle size was mixed; from dust up to 5 mm. The activated carbon was of commercial grade and average particle size of 1.5 mm. Solids were washed with pure water, dried in the oven for 24 hours at 105°C, and stored in the desiccator until used.

2.5 Experimental procedure for physical and biological processes

The following sets of experiments were conducted (Table 5):

- a) The effect of aeration was first studied by mixing 250 mL of leachate and 350 mL of tap water, under continuous stirring for 24 hours (Experiment 1). This set up was used as reference reactors for all experiments as well.

- b) The effect of aeration under high pH was studied by mixing 250 mL of leachate and 350 mL of tap water, under continuous stirring for 17 hours (Experiment 2). This type of pretreatment is important for an efficient biological treatment since ammonia is removed by air stripping [57]. To increase pH from 8.5 to 12, concentrated potassium hydroxide solution was used. At the end of the pretreatment step, pH was reduced manually to 7 by use of hydrochloric acid before the initiation of the biological treatment.
- c) The effect of solids addition was studied by adding equal amounts of activated carbon and natural zeolite in the reactor, ranging in 3-18 g/L . Aeration and agitation were constantly applied throughout the experiment. Reference reactors were used as well, containing the same liquid mixture but without the solids (Experiments 3-7).
- d) Biological treatment was conducted in aerobic, anaerobic and combined aerobic/anaerobic conditions (Experiments 8-16). Specifically, 250 mL of leachate was mixed with 200 mL of activated sludge, and diluted to 600 mL with tap water. During aerobic treatment, the reactors were under constant mixing and aeration using air pumps, whereas anaerobic condition was accomplished by sealing the reactor with parafilm under constant stirring under aeration. The duration of the experiments was 24 h hours and the HRT 1.5 days. Such short experiments can be useful for preliminary assessments, as discussed for example in Aghamohammadi et al. [59] and Kargi and Pamukoglu [57]. To observe the effect of pH on bioreactors performance, additional experiments were conducted. A set of experiments was conducted with initial adjustment of pH to 7 using concentrated hydrochloric acid with no further intervention (Experiments 9-11). As pH increased with time and in order to ensure the bacterial activity of activated sludge, pH was manually adjusted in the range of 7-8 in the third experimental set for the first 2.5 hours (Experiments 12-13). Finally, combined anaerobic/aerobic treatment was studied (Experiments 14-16).

All experiments were run at least in duplicates along with a reference reactor. The average standard deviation between the results of the duplicate reactors was $6.7\pm 6\%$ for TC (29 runs, 52 reactors), $8.4\pm 9.3\%$ for TIC (18 runs, 36 reactors) and $15.7\pm 13\%$ for N-NH₄ (16 runs, 32 reactors).

Samples were collected from supernatant solution after solid particles were settled, and filtered through 1.2 and, if necessary, through 0.45 microns filters, diluted with ultrapure water, and stored at 4°C before analysis.

Table 5. Experimental details for physical and biological processes

Run	Tap water (ml)	Leachate (ml)	Activated sludge (ml)	Solids mass (g/L)	Pretreatment	Bioreactor mode Aero: Aerobic Anox: Anoxic	pH A: initial adjustment C: Control
1	350	250	0	0	-	-	-
2	350	250	0	0	-	-	12 (A)
3	350	250	0	3	-	-	-
4	350	250	0	9	-	-	-
5	350	250	0	12	-	-	-
6	350	250	0	15	-	-	-
7	350	250	0	18	-	-	-
8	150	250	200	0	-	Aero	-
9	150	250	200	0	-	Aero	7 (A)
10	150	250	200	9	-	Aero	7 (A)
11	150	250	200	0	-	Anox	7 (A)
12	150	250	200	0	17h, pH=12	Aero	7 (C) for 2.5h
13	150	250	200	9	17h, pH=12	Aero	7 (C) for 2.5h
14	150	250	200	0	17h, pH=12	Aero(12h)+Anox(12h)	7 (A)
15	150	250	200	0	17h, pH=12	Anox(12h)+Aero(12h)	7 (A)
16	150	250	200	9	17h, pH=12	Anox(12h)+Aero(12h)	7 (A)

2.5 Photochemical treatment

Three leachate samples were used for photochemical treatment experiments: (a) raw leachate (250 ml leachate to 600 ml final volume, as in the physical and biological treatment experiments,) with initial TC concentration around 2450-2700 mg/L (45% inorganic carbon), TN 900-1100 mg/L and initial pH 8.3, called simply leachate, (b) raw leachate further diluted so that initial TC was around 540 mg/L, called diluted leachate, and (c) the treated leachate from the experiment 12 (pretreatment at pH 12, pH control at 7, aerated bioreactor with 9 g/L solids) (Experiment 13, Table 5), called treated leachate.

Photochemical experiments were conducted in an annular photoreactor operated in batch recycle mode, as shown in Figure 2. Specifically, the total leachate volume to be treated was 250 mL, whereas the active (irradiated) volume 55.8 mL. Ultraviolet light of 254 nm was produced from

an 6 W lamp placed inside the photoreactor. Depending on the case, H_2O_2 ranged in 2664-13320 mg/L and Fe(III) in 0-140 ppm. A peristaltic pump with a rate of 175 mL/min was used to continuously circulate the wastewater solution. A magnetic stirrer was used to constantly mix the part of the solution that was not irradiated by the UV-lamp. Throughout the whole duration of each experiment, pH was measured. Experiments lasted 120-150 minutes. The start of each experiment was considered immediately as the UV-lamp with the pump was turned on. Samples were taken periodically and sent for analysis.

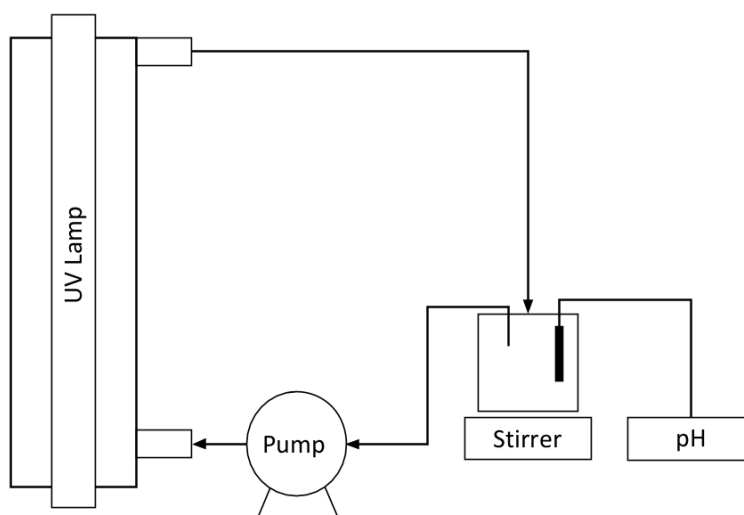


Figure 2. The experimental setup of photochemical treatment.

2.6. Analytical methods

Collected samples were equilibrated to room temperature and diluted with ultrapure water. Ion chromatography analysis was used for the analysis of NH_4^+ , NO_2^- and NO_3^- according to the method 4110B IC with chemical Suppression of Effluent Conductivity [68] by use of Metrohm IC 930 system. Total carbon, total inorganic carbon and total nitrogen analysis was conducted using the Multi N/C 3100 analyser by Atalytik Jena AG. The pH was measured using a digital pH/ion meter (Mettler Toledo S220) and conductivity was measured with digital EC meter (Five Easy™.FE 30). Total suspended solids (TSS) of leachate and activated sludge in the reactor were measured by filtering 20 ml of sample through a glass fiber filter paper with porosity grade of 1.2 μm under vacuum. The filters were dried for 24 hours in the oven at 105°C to remove all water after passing the samples through, and then they were cooled in the desiccators and weighted.

Total solids (TSS) of leachate was measured by placing 45 ml of sample in a beaker in an oven at 105°C for 24h. All samples were analyzed at least twice.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Leachate composition

The composition and properties of the leachate studied are presented in Table 6. The average amount of organic carbon contained in leachate constituted 60% of total and the remaining was inorganic carbon including carbonates and dissolved carbon dioxide. Total nitrogen analysis and N-NH₄⁺ showed that almost all nitrogen contained was in ammonium form with only traces of nitrogenous organic compounds present. The results obtained showed that the leachate under study had high concentration ammonium and pH of 8.5.

Table 6. Leachate composition of Astana MSW Landfill

Parameters	Range
pH	8.1-8.5
Conductivity (mS/cm)	24.6
TSS (g/L)	0.17 ± 0.02
TS (g/L)	13.5±1.7
TC (mg/L)	4556-5276
TIC (mg/L)	1799-1918
TOC (mg/L)	2758-2998
TN (mg/L)	2038-2278
N-NH ₄ ⁺ (mg/L)	1918-2398
Chloride (mg/L)	3357-3597
Sodium (mg/L)	2638-3118
Potassium (mg/L)	1439-1799
Magnesium (mg/L)	84-114
Calcium (mg/L)	48-60
Iron (mg/L)	23.87-35.7
Nitrate (mg/L)	0-36
Zinc (mg/L)	0.275-1.194
Chromium (mg/L)	0.625-0.893
Manganium (mg/L)	0.391-0.446
Lead (mg/L)	0.172-0.184
Cadmium (µg/L)	13-18
Cobalt (µg/L)	96-130
Cooper (µg/L)	12-16
Mercury (µg/L)	0.2-2.1

3.2. Effect of air stripping

Figure 3 shows the results of air stripping at the initial pH of the leachate (Experiment 1) and pretreatment results at pH 12 (Experiment 2). The removal observed at the end of the 24 h operation at pH 8.5 was 45% for TIC and 51% for TN, which was due to the effect of stripping of dissolved carbon dioxide and ammonium. Also, the slight removal of organic carbon (below 4%) was due to the evaporation of Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs). The pH was increased from 8-8.5 to 9.2-9.5 in all experiments. Under pH 12, 94% removal of $\text{NH}_4\text{-N}$ was observed while TOC was not affected and TIC was considerably increased by 70.4%.

In order to explain these observations, the carbonate and ammonium-ammonia equilibrium systems are discussed in the following paragraphs.

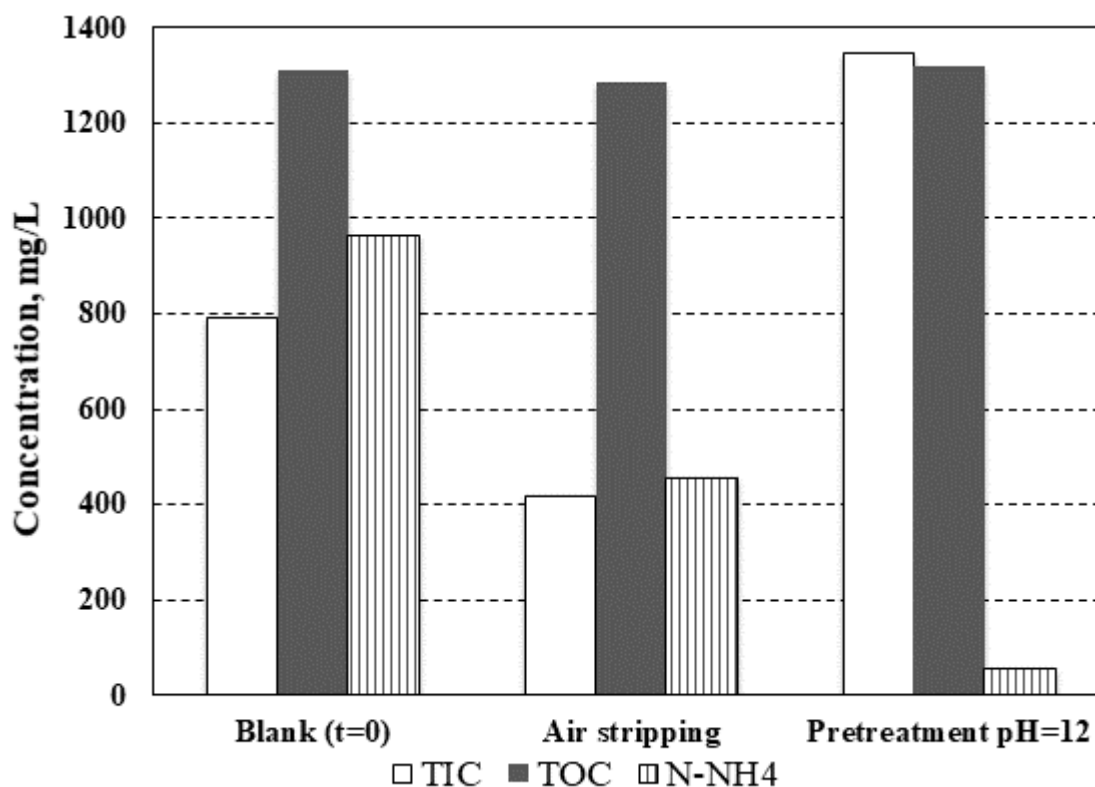


Figure 3. Effects of stripping under different pH values.

3.2.1. Ammonia/Ammonium system

The ammonia-ammonium equilibrium is:



Ammonia is extremely soluble in water but it can be stripped under aeration. Ammonia speciation is presented in Figure 4.

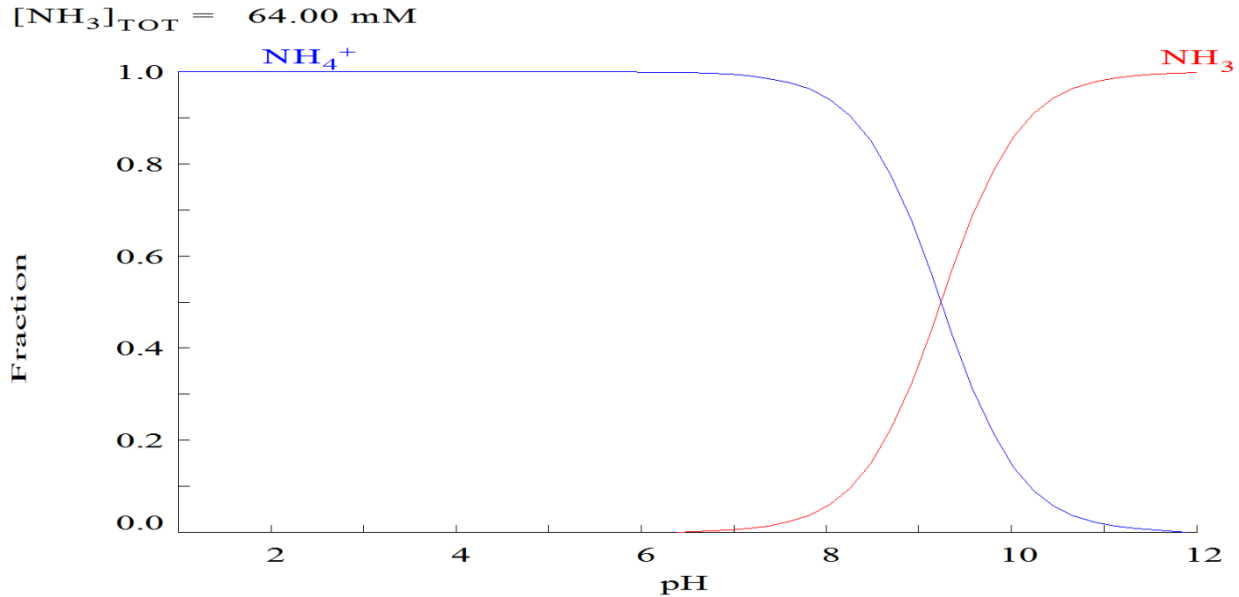
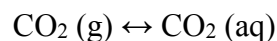


Figure 4. NH_3 speciation versus pH. *Generated by use of Medusa-Hydra chemical equilibrium software.*

The results after pretreatment at pH=12 showed that ammonia was almost entirely removed from the solution. At high pH values essentially all nitrogen was in the form of ammonia, which could be removed by stripping (Figure 3). Also, as expected, during the course of pretreatment the pH was decreased as the ammonium-ammonia equilibrium was shifted to the left, consuming OH^- . This was the reason for the final pH of 10.5 observed after the pretreatment.

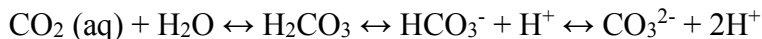
3.2.2 Carbonate system

The equilibrium of gaseous and aqueous CO_2 is:



where $\text{CO}_2 (\text{aq})$ is the dissolved (aqueous) carbon dioxide. The concentration of CO_2 as $\text{CO}_2 (\text{aq})$ is not a function of pH because of the Henry's Law equilibrium between the large reservoir of

gaseous CO₂, i.e., the atmosphere, and the finite body of water. Following the dissolution of CO₂, hydration and dissociation takes place and the resulting carbonate system equilibrium is:



where H₂CO₃ is typically in traces, as it is unstable. The pH of inorganic carbon-containing aqueous solution governs the speciation of the carbonate system and vice versa (Figure 5).

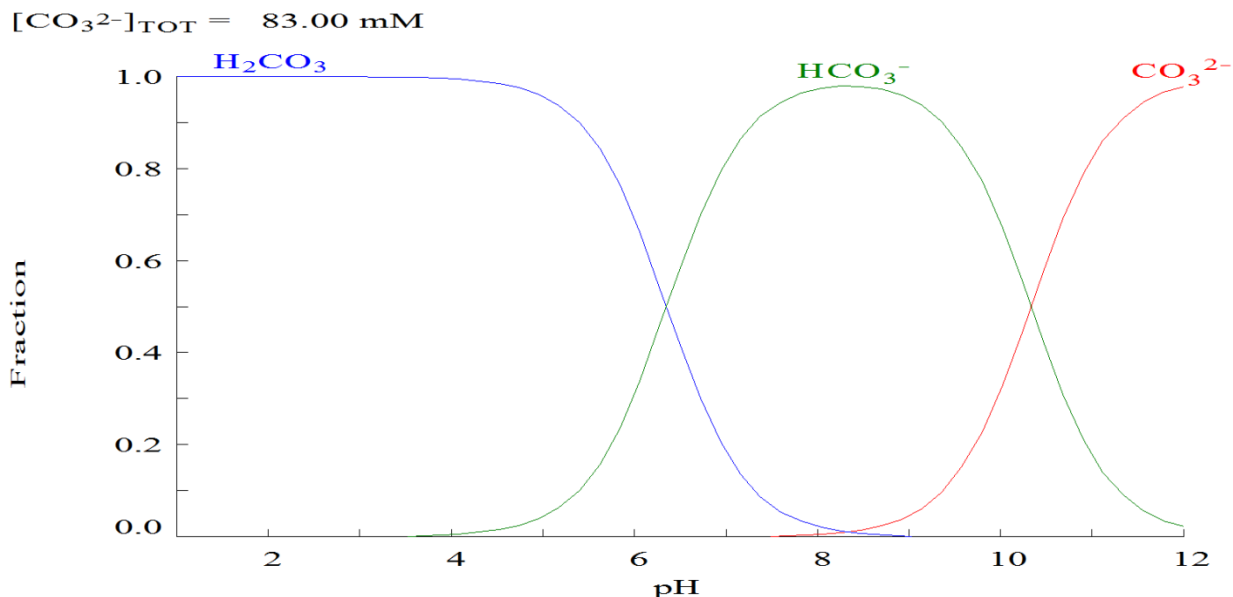


Figure 5. CO₂ speciation versus pH [$\text{H}_2\text{CO}_3 = \text{CO}_2(\text{aq}) + \text{H}_2\text{O}$]. Generated by use of Medusa-Hydra chemical equilibrium software.

The pH during stripping experiments without pH adjustment increased from 8.5 to 9.5. The increase of pH by removing CO₂ is a well-known phenomenon [69]. This is due to the CO₂ stripping driving the carbonate system to the formation of new CO₂(aq) with simultaneous consumption of H⁺. The final pH is determined by the CO₂ of the air; the amount of CO₂ stripped of the system is replaced by the air CO₂ equilibrium is attained and no further change take place [69]. On the other hand, the results after pretreatment at pH=12 showed that the amount of inorganic carbon present was substantially increased (Figure 3). This occurred because at pH=12 there were no appreciable amounts of CO₂(aq) to be stripped (Figure 5) and the aeration had the opposite effect, i.e. dissolution of CO₂(g) from the air which was rapidly transformed into CO₃²⁻.

The total amount of CO₂ (including all species, HCO₃⁻ and CO₃²⁻,) that may dissolve in water is a function of pH and so the (total) solubility of CO₂ at 25°C in water rises from 1.2*10⁻⁵ mol/L at pH< 5.5 to 0.1 mol/L at pH>10. This explains why the total CO₂ (aq) concentration is stable at pH below 5.5 since the major species is CO₂ (aq) (Figure 5). Finally, under acidic conditions, CO₃²⁻ and HCO₃⁻ combine with H⁺ to produce unstable H₂CO₃ that is subsequently decomposed into CO₂(aq) and water resulting to bubbling when lowering the pH of leachate with addition of acid [60]. As it will be discussed in paragraph 3.4.1, this is what happens in the bioreactors experiments with manual pH control at 7; the continuous addition of H⁺ promotes formation of new CO₂(aq) as equilibrium is shifted to the left. Hence, the CO₂(aq) removal by stripping continues until total inorganic carbon concentration reaches a concentration determined by solubility of CO₂(g) and the carbonate system equilibrium reaction at this pH (Figure 5).

3.3 Adsorption by use of activated carbon and natural zeolite

The removal of TIC, TOC and ammonium-N achieved is shown in Figure 6 for the range of 0-18 g/L of solids concentration (Experiments 3-7). Blank indicates the reference reactor (Experiment 1). The pH was increased from 8-8.5 to 9.2-9.5 in all experiments. As it is clear, with increasing concentrations of the adsorbents, higher ammonium and TOC removal was achieved, reaching 19.5% TOC and 71% N-NH₄ removal at 18 g/L. TIC removal fluctuated between 44-57% without showing any trend. This is in general agreement with the literature as it is known that AC can remove mainly organic compounds while natural zeolite mainly ammonia [57, 59].

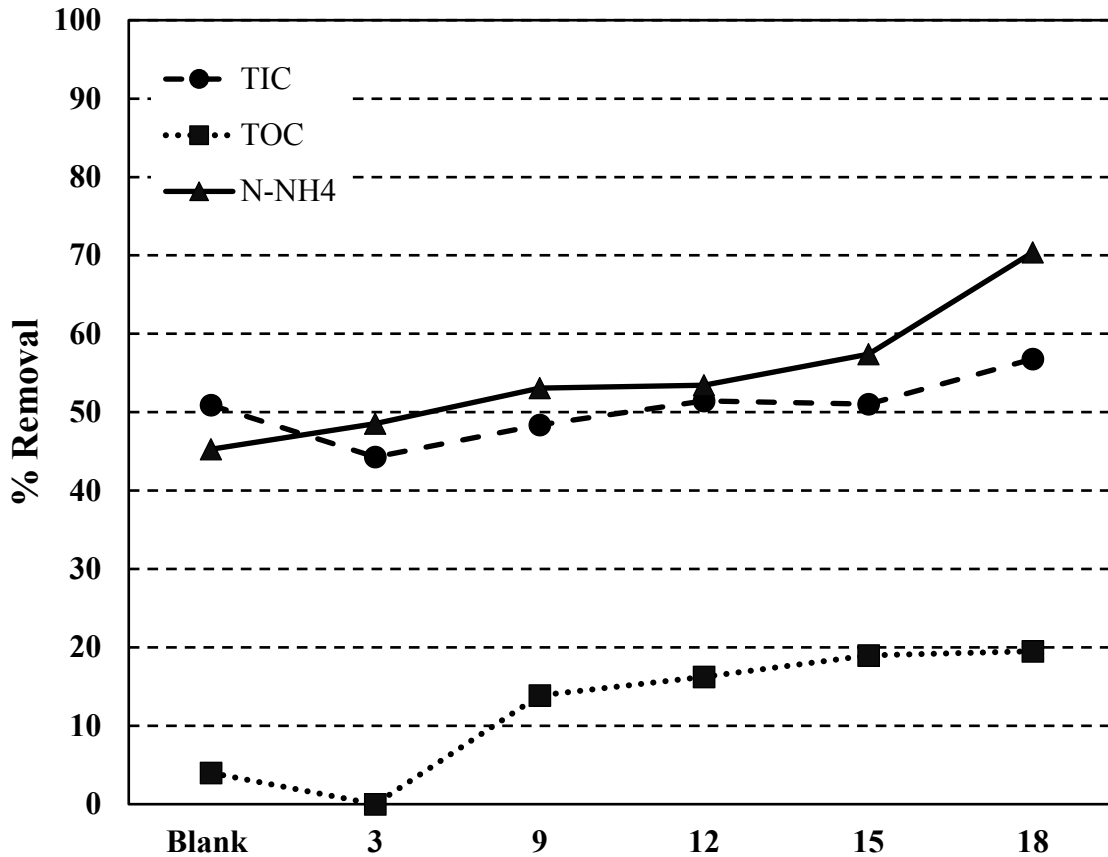


Figure 6. AC/NZ adsorption at different concentration. Equal amounts of activated carbon and natural zeolite were used, ranging in 3-18 g/L.

3.4 Biological treatment

3.4.1 Single step biological treatment

Figure 7 illustrates the biological treatment results under aerobic and anaerobic conditions (Experiments 8 and 11). Biological treatment under anaerobic conditions did not show any appreciable removal of TOC or N-NH₄ while TIC removal was low due to the absence of stripping. On the other hand, under aerobic conditions some removal of about 10.6% occurred for TOC, rising to 13.2% with initial adjustment of pH to 7 (Experiment 9). Also, the initial adjustment of pH at 7 increased the TIC removal from 51.8% to 70.7%, and marginally the N-NH₄ removal from 47.9% to 51.1%. The pH was increased from 8.2-8.5 to 9.2-9.4 in these

experiments, a pH range which was slightly higher than about the value of 9, which has been recommended for carbon removal by activated sludge [70].

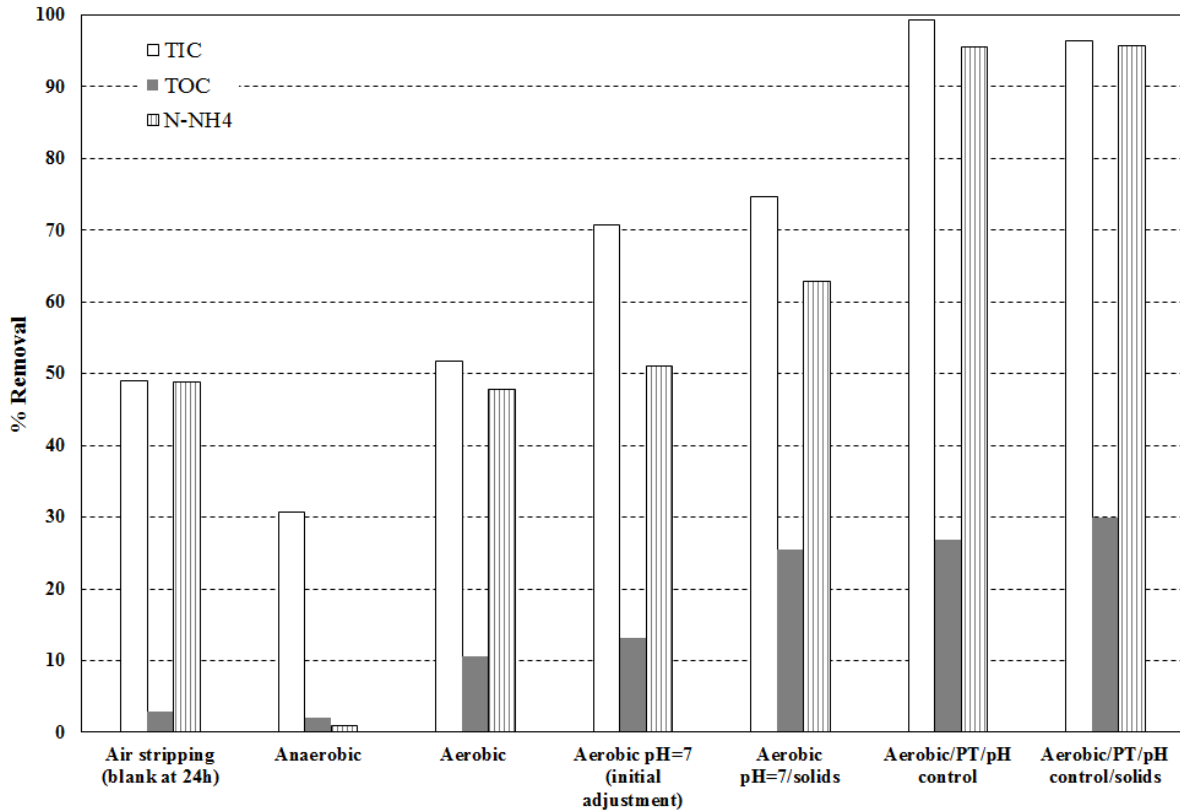


Figure 7. Aerobic and anaerobic biological treatment combinations.

Aerobic treatment with initial pH adjustment to 7 and 9 g/L solids further improved the performance of the operation, as TOC removal reached 25.5%, TIC 74.7% and N-NH₄ 62.9% (Experiment 10). This clearly shows the positive effects of activated carbon (removal of organics) and zeolite (removal of ammonia). The TOC removal achieved when combining activated sludge and solids (9 g/L) (Figure 7) was about equal to the sum of the adsorption with 9 g/L solids, which was about 14% (Figure 3) and biological oxidation with initial pH adjustment at 7, which was about 13.2% (Figure 7).

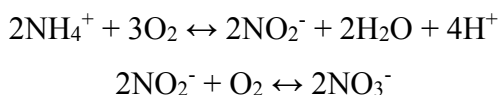
To further investigate the dependence of biological activity on N-NH₄ and pH, the combination of pretreatment at pH 12 and aerobic biological treatment is presented in Figure 7 (Experiment 12). In this set of experiments the pH was manually controlled for the first 2.5 hours at pH = 7,

after which it remained in the range of 7-8 without further intervention. This assured optimum pH conditions for the activated sludge activity. Comparing the results under these conditions with the aerobic treatment (with or without initial pH adjustment to 7, Experiments 8 and 10), the improvement was considerable, as TOC removal reached 26.8%, TIC 99.4% and N-NH₄ 95.6%. TIC removal was due to the continuous control of pH (see paragraph 3.2.2) and N-NH₄ removal due to the stripping at pH=12 (see paragraph 3.2.1). This improvement in TOC removal can be attributed mainly to the removal of N-NH₄, which in high concentrations is toxic and to lesser extent to the adequate pH range or the operation. However, the addition of solids to this combination only slightly improved the results obtained as TOC removal reached 29.9% (Experiment 13). This shows that there was a limit to the TOC removal that could be achieved with the treatment methods used, which could be attributed to the presence of non-biodegradable and bio-refractory organic compounds. This was expected as the leachate was received from an old landfill and it was thus stabilized, containing possibly several xenobiotic organic compounds (XOCs) such as hormones, pharmaceuticals, personal care products (PCPs), pesticides, brominated flame retardants, industrial retardants, industrial products, household products, and disinfectants.

3.4.2 Nitrification

The difference in performance between aerobic and anaerobic treatment of leachate clearly favors the former. Despite the low organic carbon removal observed, some degree of nitrification was achieved under aerobic conditions. As mentioned above, the pH was increased from 8-8.5 to 9.2-9.4 in these experiments, a pH range which was higher than the value of 8.5, which has been recommended for nitrification in activated sludge systems [71].

Figure 8 shows the accumulation of nitrates and nitrites, which indicates the presence of ammonia-oxidizing bacteria (AOB) and ammonia-oxidizing archaea (AOA) [64]. Oxidation of ammonium into nitrate through intermediate nitrite is known as nitrification. The reaction is as follows:



Denitrification occurs under anoxic conditions, which results in reduction of nitrates to nitrogen. The aeration rate has a complex influence on nitrification and denitrification processes. The most essential parameters of these processes include the initial amount of nitrogen compounds in the reactor, aeration rate, activated sludge volume, as well as the quantity and characteristics of the existing organic substances [72]. As it is evident from Figure 8, some nitrification occurred in the aerobic reactor and some denitrification in the anaerobic reactor, as expected. This shows that nitrification and denitrification processes were not entirely inhibited under the experimental conditions studied in this research, however the ammonia removal was almost entirely due to stripping or adsorption.

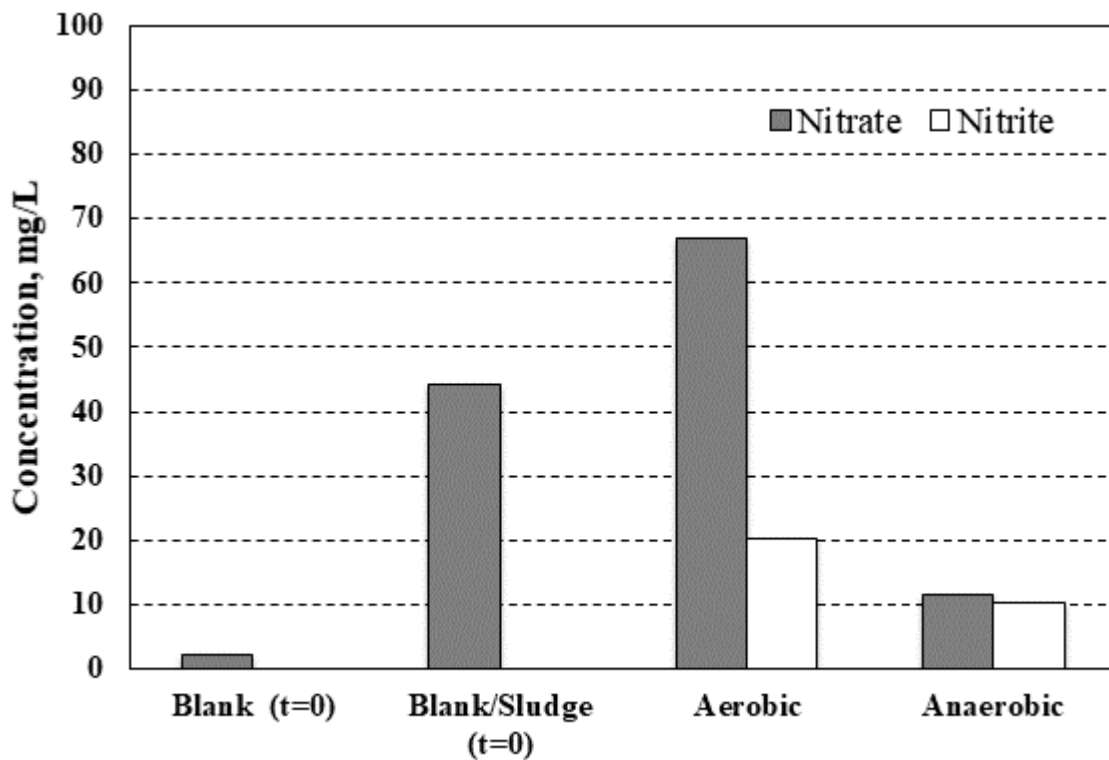


Figure 8. Nitrate and nitrite concentrations after nitrification.

3.4.3 Sequential aerobic and anaerobic treatment

Aerobic sludge treatment followed by anaerobic and vice versa can enhance the degradation of organic matter compared to single step treatment [64]. In this set of experiments, the pH was increased from 8-8.5 to 9.3-9.6, a pH range, which was slightly higher than 9, a pH value

recommended for carbon removal by activated sludge (Experiments 14-16). Also, while after 12 h treatment in anaerobic/aerobic (An/Aero) combination, the pH reached 7.1-8.1 (due to absence of TIC stripping), that of aerobic/anaerobic (Aero/An) combination was around 9.5. However, that did not seem to have any effect on the performance of the reactors with combined aerobic/anaerobic steps (Figure 9).

The reactors with combined biological steps reached a TOC removal of 24.8-29.6% and with the addition of solids, 36.7%. Again, the benefits of the N-NH₄ removal by pretreatment at pH=12 were evident but the combination of aerobic and anaerobic steps did not seem to offer much in comparison to single aerobic reactors unless combined to adsorption (Experiment 16), as it increased the TOC removal from 29.9% in the respective aerobic reactor to 36.7% (Figure 7). The almost 100% removal of N-NH₄ was due to the pretreatment at pH 12 and the low TIC removal was due to the reduced aeration time (12 h in Aero mode).

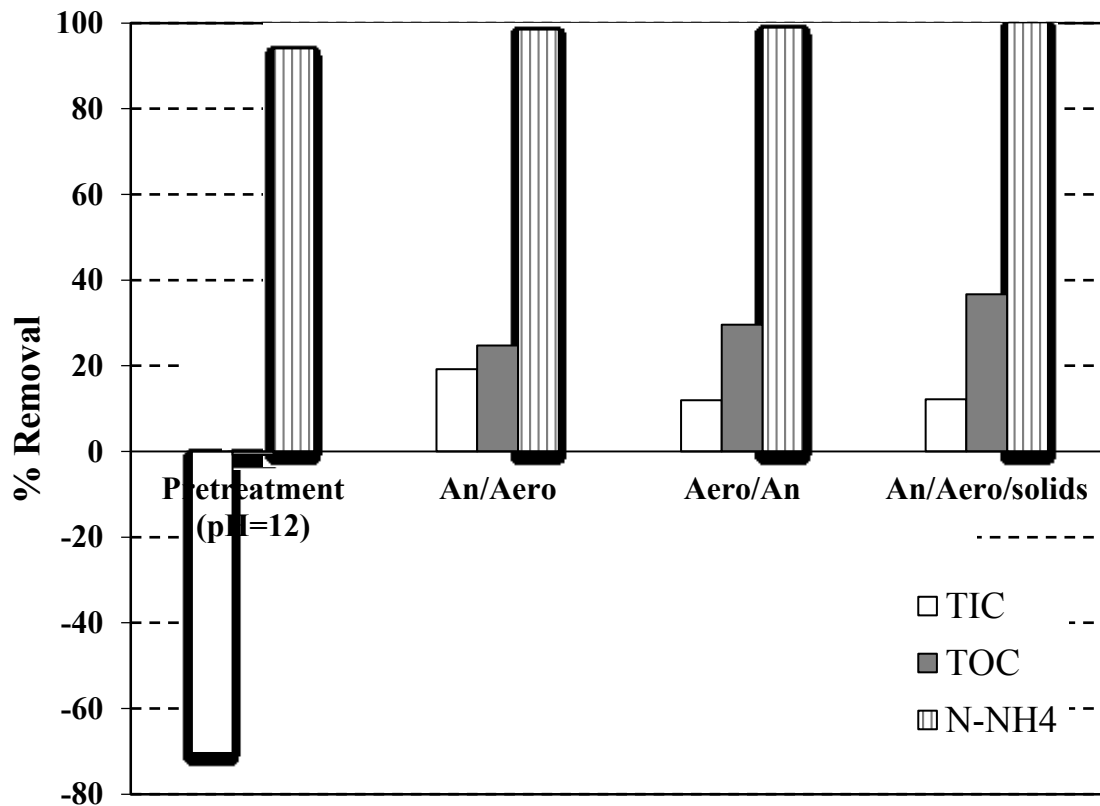


Figure 9. Sequential aerobic/anaerobic and anaerobic/aerobic treatment (with pretreatment).

3.4.4 Effect of pH control

It is known that pH has a significant effect on the activity of activated sludge with the optimum value ranging in 7-8. In Figure 10, the evolution of pH with time after its initial adjustment at 7 in the aerobic and anaerobic reactor experiments is shown (Experiments 9 and 11). It can be observed that pH increased sharply at the first 3 hours of the experiment, which can be attributed to high CO₂ mass transfer rates due to stripping at the beginning of the process.

In order to test the performance of biological treatment during the first hours, samples were withdrawn at the beginning (t=1 h) and after completion of the experiment (t=24 h). TOC removal efficiency was 28% and 30%, respectively, which shows that the adsorption and biological processes took place mainly during the first hours of treatment (Figure 11). The difference in inorganic carbon and ammonium removal was due to longer air stripping in the second case.

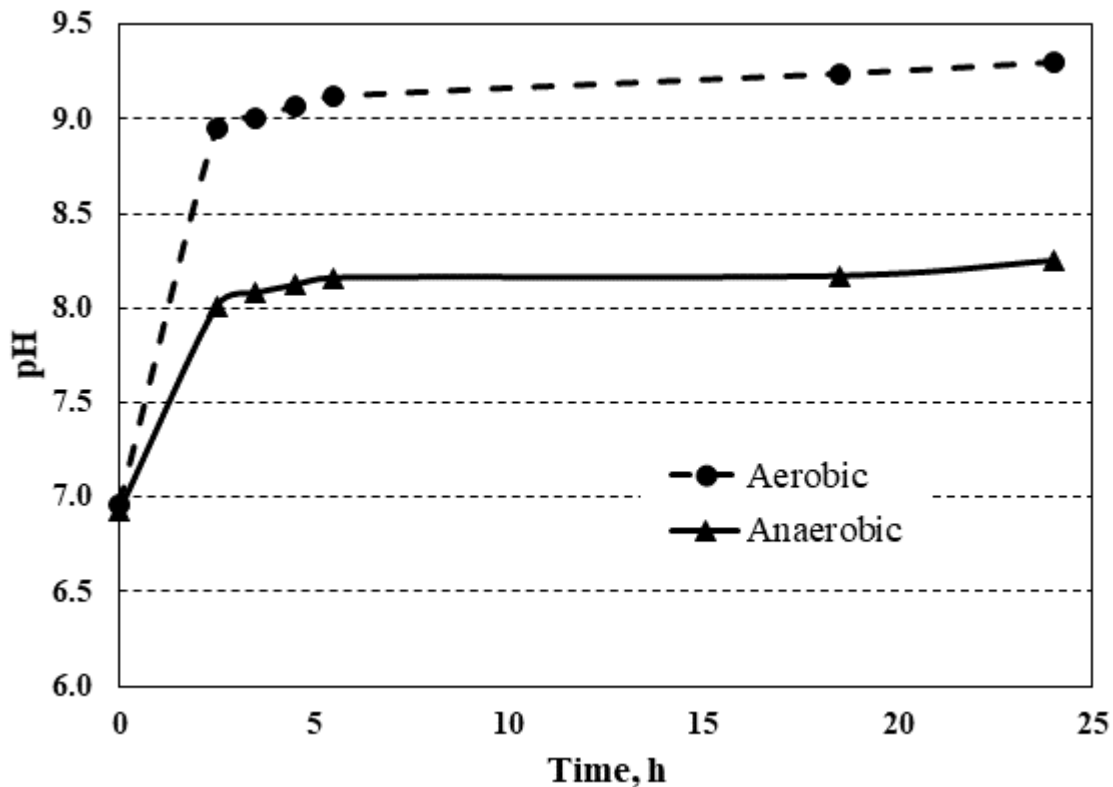


Figure 10. pH variation with time after initial adjustment at pH = 7.

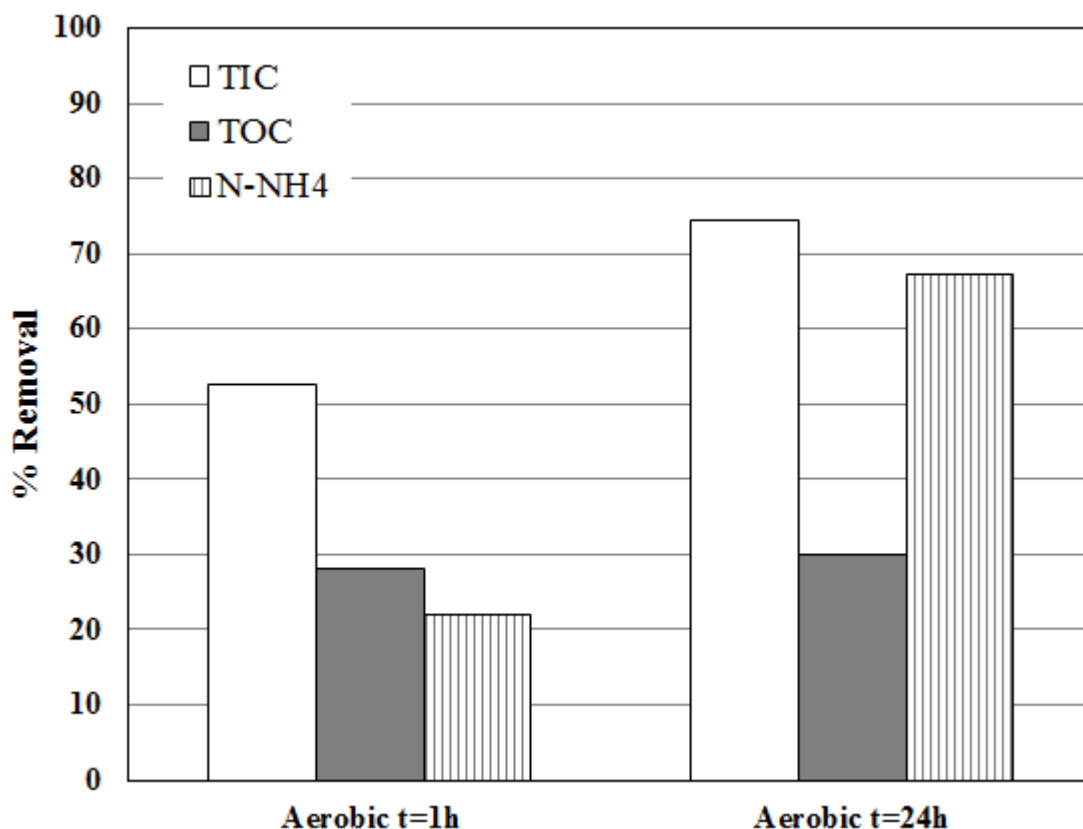


Figure 11. Aerobic bioreactors performance at solids concentration of 9 g/L and initial pH adjustment at 7.

3.5 Photochemical treatment

The leachate used in photochemical experiments had initial TC concentration around 2450-2700 mg/L with 1100-1200 mg/L being inorganic carbon. So, inorganic carbon accounted for around 45% of total carbon in the leachate. Total nitrogen was 900-1100 mg/L and initial pH 8.3. Initially, 13320 mg/L H₂O₂ were used to treat the solution. As shown in Figure 12, the TC removal obtained after 2 h remained below 5%. Then, the leachate was further diluted with water to an initial TC equal to 540 mg/L and 2664 mg/L H₂O₂ were used. The TC removal obtained was 11.8%, still too low to be of any practical use. The addition of 80 ppm (w/w) Fe(III) only led to a TC removal 22.3%. The amounts of H₂O₂ and Fe(III) used were the optimum ones found in earlier experiments for achieving 80% mineralization of a synthetic municipal wastewater with

similar initial TC (≈ 540 mg/L). Since decreasing the initial TC by a factor about 5 and adding Fe(III) did not lead to any remarkable results, the next step included the adjustment of initial pH to the acidic range. So, decreasing the initial pH to 4.99 by means of hydrochloric acid, while keeping the same initial concentrations of all components (TC=540 mg/L, $H_2O_2=2664$ mg/L, Fe(III)=80 ppm), increased markedly the TC removal achieved after 2 h to 69.8%. The TC removal observed was mainly due to the removal of most inorganic carbon from the solution almost instantly as a result of the initial pH adjustment.

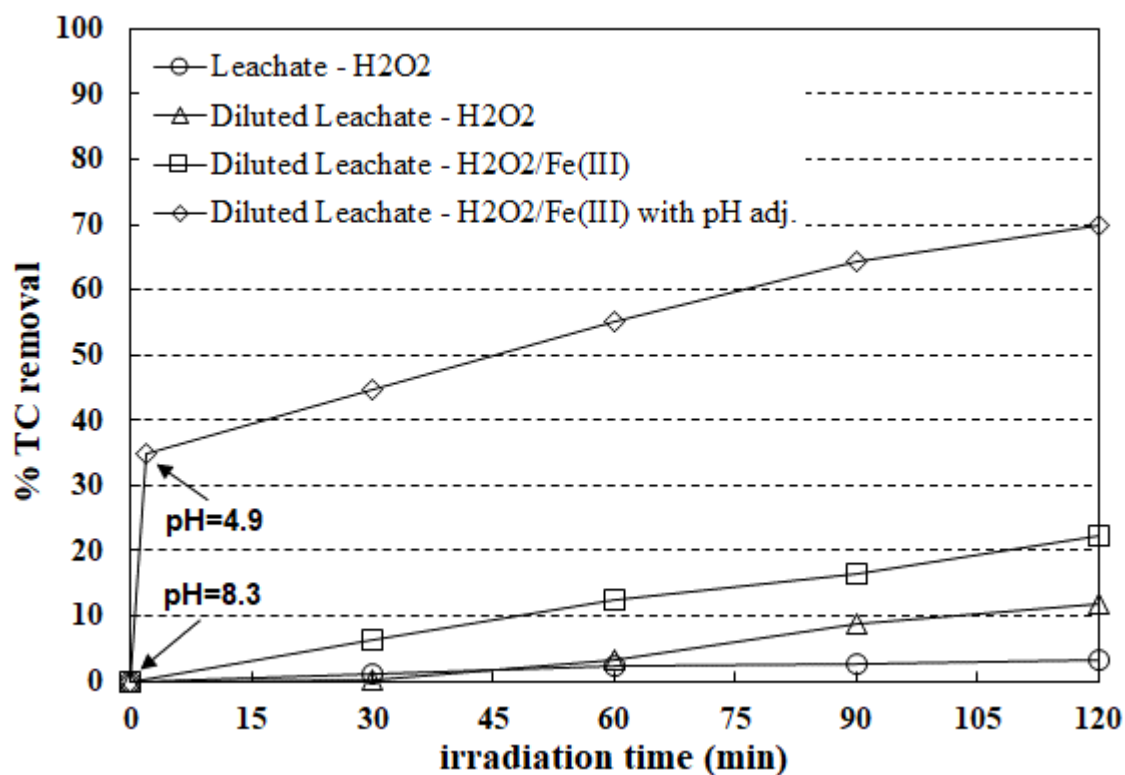


Figure 12. TC removal in the photochemical treatment of leachate.

The next step was to apply the combination of hydrogen peroxide, ferric ions and initial pH adjustment to a value below 5 for the initial leachate (undiluted, not treated) as well as for the treated leachate (TC=930 mg/L, pH=7.8). The treatment time was extended to 150 min. The results obtained are depicted in Figure 13. The TC removals obtained for the (undiluted, not treated) leachate were similar to the ones for the diluted one with pH adjustment shown in Figure 12. When the treated leachate was used as feed in the photochemical process, the increase in the

initial concentration of hydrogen peroxide led to increased TC removals obtained, which were lower than the ones for the (undiluted, not treated) leachate, since most inorganic carbon had been already removed in the bio-treatment (Figure 14). Foaming was observed during these experiments.

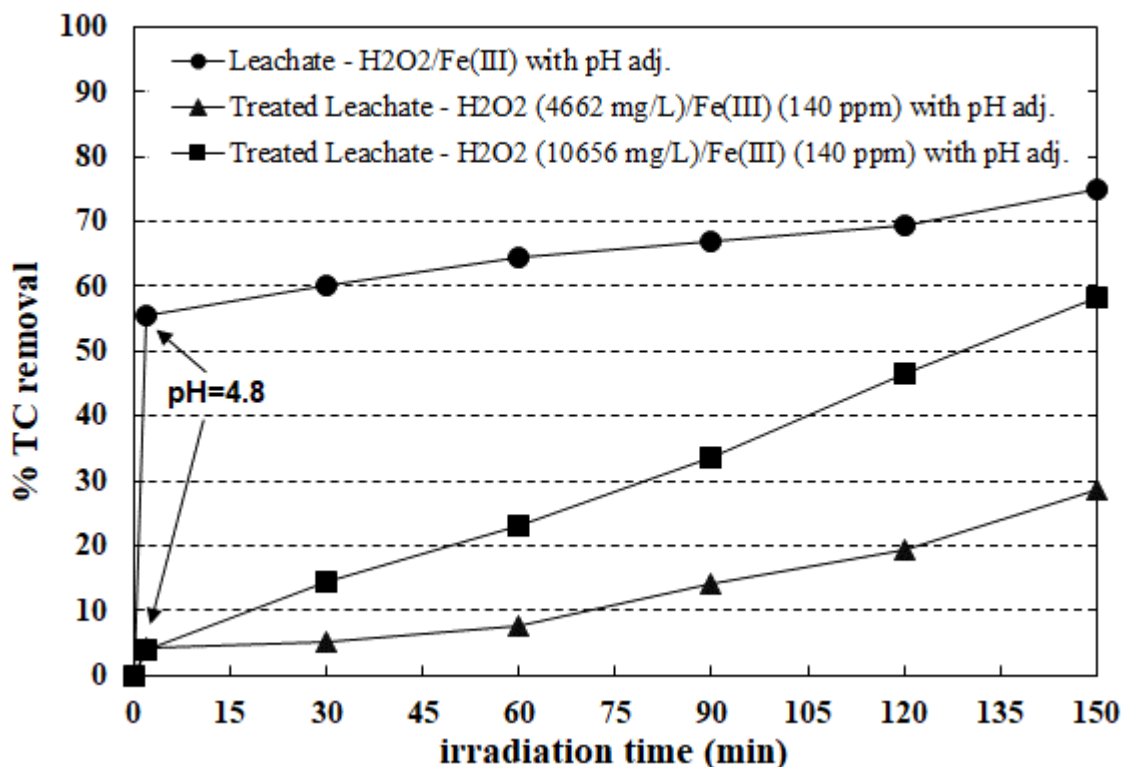


Figure 13. TC removal in the photochemical treatment of leachate and treated leachate with initial pH adjustment.

It is thus interesting to determine the total organic carbon removal (TOC) in the process by removing the contribution of TIC to TC. As it is shown in Figure 15, TOC removal with pH adjustment in (undiluted, not treated) leachate reached 43%. Also, with pH adjustment and increased initial amount of H₂O₂, 58.7% TOC removal was achieved after 2.5 h for the treated leachate during the photochemical treatment. Regarding TN, the photochemical process had no impact on it.

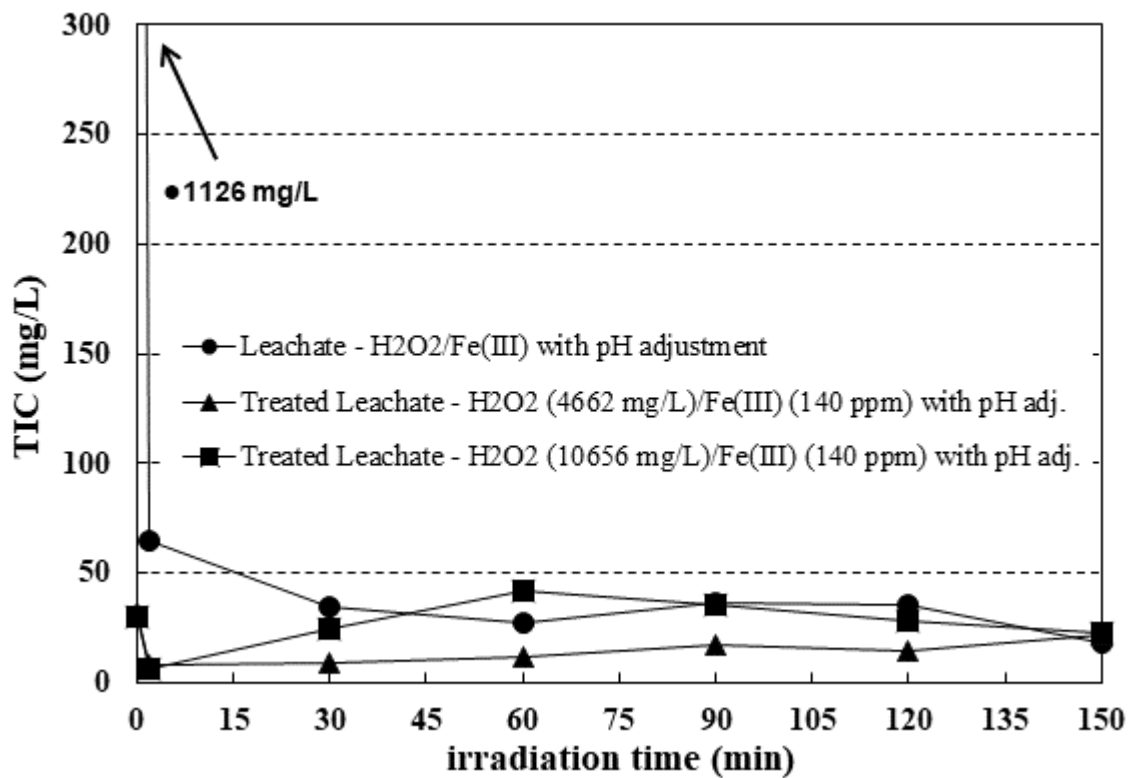


Figure 14. TIC removal in the photochemical treatment of leachate and treated leachate with initial pH adjustment.

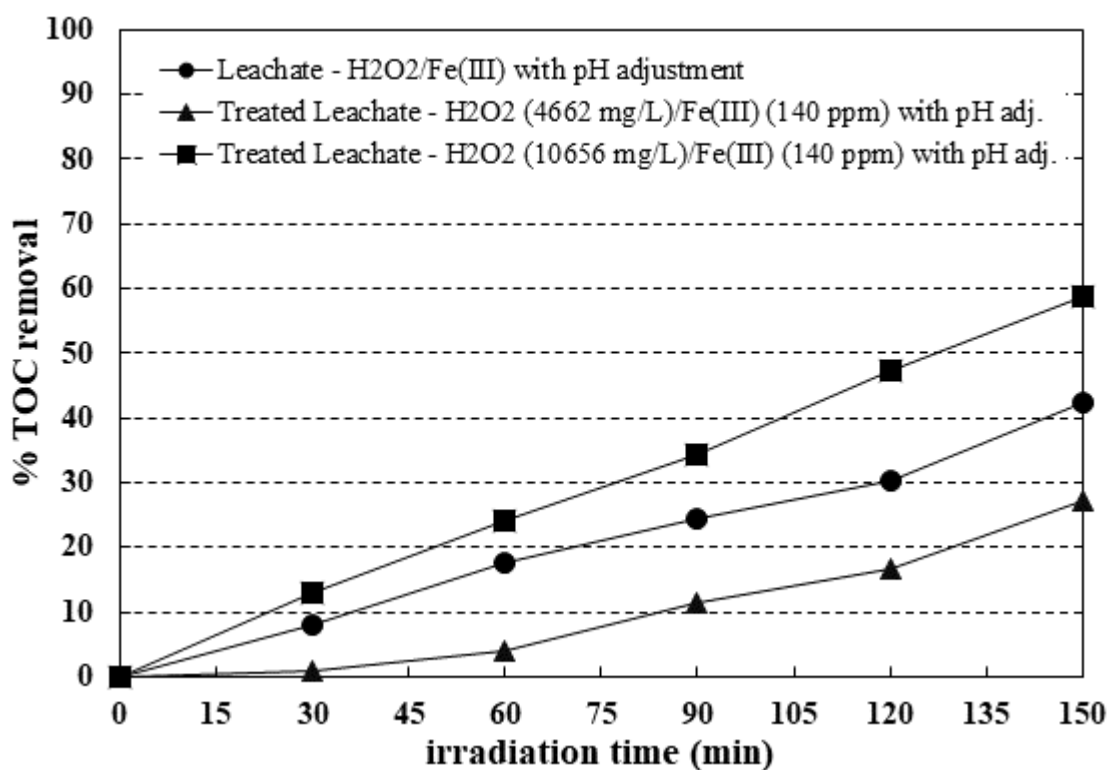


Figure 15. TOC removal in the photochemical treatment of leachate and treated leachate with initial pH adjustment.

Several efforts have been made to treat landfill leachates by means of photochemical [73] or combined biological-photochemical processes [74, 75]. The results obtained in the present study are in accordance with the ones reported in similar ones. Specifically, when AOPs are used to treat landfill leachates, the TN removals obtained are low as a result of slow rates for ammonia nitrogen oxidation by hydroxyl radicals [76]. For ammonia nitrogen removal from leachates, stripping at high pH has been suggested among other options [60]. Foaming is also a common issue when AOPs are used in the treatment of leachates. Its formation can be attributed to either CO₂ produced from carbonate species at low pH values or organic foaming agents in the leachate [77]. The low efficiency of the photochemical process before pH adjustment is related to the inorganic carbon initially present. Specifically, carbonate (CO₃²⁻) and bicarbonate (HCO₃⁻) act as hydroxyl scavengers inhibiting thus the oxidation of organic molecules by hydroxyl radicals. The easiest way to remove these inorganic species so that the process can be effective in removing the organic carbon in the leachate is to decrease the pH with addition of acid [60]. As

discussed earlier, under such conditions, CO_3^{2-} and HCO_3^- combine with H^+ to produce unstable H_2CO_3 that is subsequently decomposed into $\text{CO}_2(\text{aq})$ and water. Organic compounds like humic substances are generally responsible for the initial dark color of leachates. The molecular weights of humic substances generally increase with landfill age [78]. As these large organic compounds are degraded into smaller and simpler molecules when an AOP is applied, decolorization efficiencies are commonly higher than COD removals. Reported values of COD and TOC removals range significantly depending on the leachate characteristics and process operating conditions [4, 60, 79].

4. Conclusions

The complexity of leachate composition makes its treatment a challenging task. In the current study, physical (stripping, adsorption), biological (activated sludge process) and photochemical processes in single and combined steps were tested for an efficient treatment of this wastewater. Air stripping in two steps, i.e. at $\text{pH} = 12$ for the removal of ammonia and $\text{pH} = 7$ for the removal of carbonates was a necessary pretreatment process. The results showed that inorganic carbon and ammonia was almost entirely removed by air stripping at $\text{pH}=7$ and $\text{pH}=12$, respectively. This step is particularly important if aerobic biological process is employed; elevated ammonia is toxic for activated sludge while elevated carbonates content in combination to aeration leads to a pH increase beyond 9-9.5, which again inhibits the activated sludge activity. Adsorption, while not as crucial as stripping, is useful as it can remove part of the toxic organics that are difficult to be biologically or even chemically decomposed. The removal of organic carbon by stripping alone was lower than 4%, but combined to adsorption reached 20%, and to biological treatment 30%. The combination of stripping, adsorption and biological treatment resulted in 37% organic carbon removal. Concerning the photochemical treatment, pH adjustment to $\text{pH}=5$ is essential as for more basic solutions the process fails. A side effect of the pH adjustment is the removal of inorganic carbon. The removal of organic carbon by photochemical oxidation was 43% while the photochemical step had no effect on ammonia. Finally, the combination of air stripping, adsorption, biological and photochemical oxidation steps increased the organic carbon removal to 59%.

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