

Similarity laws of the fiber-matrix interface crack in polymer composites

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ABSTRACT

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1. Introduction

One of the most promising developments in Fiber Reinforced Polymer Composites (FRPCs) for advanced structural applications is currently represented by *thin-ply* laminates [1]. Constituted by extremely thin plies, with t_{90° as small as just $\sim 4-5$ fiber diameters, this family of laminates is characterized by its damage tolerance, in particular the capability of delaying to higher strains and even suppressing the onset and propagation of transverse cracks [2]. The recent experimental assessment of transverse cracks suppression in *thin-ply* laminates [3, 4, 5] validates the existence of a *ply-thickness* effect [5] at scales $10\times$ smaller than those at which it was originally observed at the end of the 1970's [6]. Onset of transverse cracks coincides at the microscopic level with the formation of fiber/matrix interface cracks [7], or debonds. After the inter-fiber stress [8] and strain concentration [9] causes the matrix to fail at or close the fiber interface, debonds grow along the fiber arc direction until a maximum or critical size is reached. If the applied load is increased, debonds move into the matrix or “kink” out of the fiber/matrix interface [10, 11]. Coalescence of debonds then occurs, which corresponds macroscopically to through-the-thickness transverse crack propagation [10, 12]. Finally, propagation through the specimen width occurs [10].

Given that *thin-ply*s, as previously noted, can reach nowadays thicknesses of just $\sim 4-5$ fiber diameters, the characteristic size of the ply, i.e. the thickness t_{90° , is now comparable in magnitude to the characteristic size of debonds, i.e. the fiber diameter $2R_f$, such that $t_{90^\circ}/(2R_f) \sim \mathcal{O}(1)$. This has motivated in recent years a renewed interest in debond growth modeling [12, 13, 14, 15]. Since the elastic solution to the interface crack problem implies an oscillating solution at the crack tip [16] in the *open* case (crack faces not in contact), Stress Intensify Factors (SIFs) are not defined and debond growth characterization has focused on the determination of Mode I, Mode II and total Energy Release Rate (ERR). Many authors have reported their results in normalized form [11, 17, 18], by defining a reference ERR G_0 . The definition of such reference ERR would be useful to establish similarity laws and thus to allow comparisons between

different material systems, scales, loads and microstructural arrangement. However, no agreement can be found in the literature on the very definition of G_0 and expressions vary between authors. Furthermore, no clear derivation of G_0 has been proposed. In this brief contribution, we provide a derivation of G_0 based on arguments of dimensional analysis, material homogenization and fracture mechanics; we then apply the derived expression of reference ERR to the analysis of debond growth in Representative Volume Elements (RVEs) of UD composites and cross-ply laminates.

2. Dimensional analysis

We first recall that the Energy Release Rate G has units of energy E per unit area:

$$[G] = \frac{E}{L^2}, \quad (1)$$

where L stands for unit of length. By algebraic manipulation of Equation 1 we can write the units of ERR as

$$\frac{E}{L^2} = \frac{F \cdot L}{L^2} = \frac{F}{L^2} L, \quad (2)$$

where F stands for unit of force. We recognize that, in Equation 2

$$\frac{F}{L^2} = [\sigma] \quad \frac{L}{L} = [\epsilon], \quad (3)$$

where σ and ϵ are respectively stress and strain. The Energy Release Rate is thus dimensionally equivalent to a reference stress σ_{ref} times a reference strain ϵ_{ref} times a reference length l_{ref} and we can write

$$G \sim \sigma_{ref} \epsilon_{ref} l_{ref}. \quad (4)$$

In the case of uniaxial loading, we can assume that: in a stress-controlled experiment, σ_{ref} is equal to the applied

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stress σ_0 and ϵ_{ref} to the average strain ϵ_0 in the Representative Volume Element (RVE); in a strain-controlled experiment, ϵ_{ref} is equal to the applied strain ϵ_0 and σ_{ref} to the average stress σ_{av} in the Representative Volume Element (RVE).

Under the assumption of linear elastic material constituents, we have, respectively for a stress- and strain-controlled experiment:

$$\epsilon_{av} = E_{homo}\sigma_0 \quad \sigma_{av} = E_{homo}\epsilon_0, \quad (5)$$

where E_{homo} is a homogenized RVE Young's modulus which measures the RVE elastic response in the presence of different material phases and damage. It is worth to point out here that, as we are interested in studying debond growth in the context of transverse crack onset, RVEs are loaded in the direction transverse to the fibers in the layer where debonds are present. Furthermore, we consider RVEs that are 2-dimensional and under the assumption of plane strain or plane stress conditions.

3. Representative Volume Elements (RVEs)

4. Similarity laws

5. Conclusions

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