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Review of speed control methods for three-phase induction motors using microcontrollers and AC voltage-frequency regulation

Watra Arsadiando[1], Tole Sutikno[2]
[1]Embedded Systems and Power Electronics Research Group, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
[2]Faculty of Industrial Technology, Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Three-phase induction motors are widely employed in industrial applications because of their robust construction, operational reliability, relatively low maintenance requirements, and cost-effectiveness. However, operating these motors at a fixed supply frequency limits their flexibility in applications requiring adjustable rotational speed and efficient energy utilization. Microcontroller-based control systems offer a practical solution by integrating programmable switching techniques with power electronic converters to regulate the voltage and frequency supplied to the motor. This review examines the fundamental principles, implementation technologies, and developments in three-phase induction motor speed control, focusing on AC voltage regulation and variable voltage-variable frequency (VVVF) techniques. Particular attention is given to phase-angle control, pulse-width modulation (PWM), sinusoidal PWM (SPWM), and constant voltage-to-frequency (V/f) control. Previous studies demonstrate that voltage regulation provides a relatively simple solution for applications with specific load characteristics, whereas frequency regulation offers a more effective approach to achieving a wider speed-control range. The review also identifies technical challenges related to switching harmonics, torque stability, microcontroller processing capability, and system integration. Finally, research opportunities are discussed to support the development of reliable, efficient, and cost-effective microcontroller-based motor control systems.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Three-phase induction motors are among the most widely used electrical machines in industrial applications because of their mechanical simplicity, durability, and reliable performance. These motors are commonly employed in pumps, compressors, conveyors, fans, manufacturing equipment, and automated production systems. Despite their advantages, conventional induction motors connected directly to a fixed-frequency electrical supply generally operate within a relatively narrow speed range. Consequently, applications requiring variable operating speeds need additional electrical control systems.

The main research problem concerns the development of an effective speed-control system that combines operational flexibility, energy efficiency, and reasonable implementation costs. Traditional methods of controlling induction motor speed often involve mechanical arrangements or electrical equipment that provide limited flexibility. Advances in power electronics have introduced semiconductor converters capable of regulating the electrical conditions supplied to the motor. Furthermore, microcontrollers have made it possible to implement programmable switching strategies and automatic operating functions within relatively compact electronic systems.

Microcontroller-based motor control provides opportunities to improve the flexibility of conventional electrical drive systems. A microcontroller can generate pulse-width modulation (PWM)

signals, calculate switching intervals, process feedback measurements, and coordinate inverter operation. However, the microcontroller cannot directly deliver the power required by an industrial induction motor, making an appropriate power electronic interface essential. Therefore, the interaction between control algorithms, switching devices, inverter topology, and motor characteristics represents a fundamental consideration in designing an effective speed-control system.

This review examines the principal methods of controlling three-phase induction motor speed through AC voltage and frequency regulation using microcontroller-based systems. The discussion covers conventional voltage regulation, PWM-based AC controllers, inverter technologies, and constant V/f control. It also compares their advantages and limitations based on previously published research available up to 2015. The objective is to establish a technical understanding of existing approaches and identify research opportunities for improving motor control performance.

2. FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF THREE-PHASE INDUCTION MOTOR SPEED CONTROL

The rotational speed of a three-phase induction motor is primarily determined by the frequency of its electrical supply and the number of magnetic poles. The actual rotor speed is slightly lower than synchronous speed because of the slip required to produce electromagnetic torque. Therefore, modifying the supply frequency provides a direct means of changing the motor's operating speed. However, the applied voltage must also be considered to maintain appropriate magnetic flux and torque characteristics.

Two major approaches are commonly considered for controlling induction motor speed. The first involves adjusting the stator voltage while maintaining a constant supply frequency, whereas the second regulates both voltage and frequency using an electronic converter. Voltage-based regulation is relatively simple because it can be implemented using semiconductor AC voltage controllers. Frequency-based regulation requires an inverter capable of generating an adjustable-frequency three-phase output. These approaches differ considerably in terms of operating range, torque characteristics, circuit complexity, and implementation costs.

An important limitation of voltage-only speed control is its influence on electromagnetic torque. Reducing stator voltage decreases the available torque capability and may cause excessive slip under demanding mechanical loads. Consequently, this technique is generally more appropriate for applications where the load torque decreases with rotational speed. In contrast, frequency regulation combined with suitable voltage adjustment provides better opportunities to maintain motor flux and operating torque across different speed settings [1], [2].

3. MICROCONTROLLER-BASED MOTOR CONTROL ARCHITECTURE

A microcontroller-based induction motor controller generally consists of a reference input, digital processing unit, gate-driving circuit, power converter, and feedback measurement system. The reference input determines the required operating speed through a potentiometer, keypad, or digital interface. The microcontroller processes this information and generates appropriate switching signals according to the selected control strategy. These signals are subsequently transferred to the semiconductor switching devices through suitable gate-driver and electrical isolation circuits.

PWM is an important technique for generating controlled switching patterns in three-phase inverter systems. The microcontroller produces switching signals by adjusting the pulse widths and their relative timing to obtain the required output voltage waveform. Dalapati and Pal demonstrated that a general-purpose microcontroller could generate balanced three-phase sinusoidal PWM signals for inverter applications [3]. Their work also investigated the use of microcontrollers for V/f-controlled induction motor drives, demonstrating that specialized motor-control processors are not always necessary for basic drive implementations.

The selection of a microcontroller depends on the computational requirements and switching characteristics of the intended application. Conventional devices such as the AT89C52 and PIC microcontrollers can generate PWM patterns using internal timers, interrupts, and programmed switching sequences. More advanced digital signal controllers provide additional capabilities for high-resolution PWM generation, signal acquisition, and real-time control processing. Nevertheless, the selected processor must provide sufficient timing accuracy and computational capacity to maintain synchronized switching operation.

4. AC VOLTAGE REGULATION METHODS

4.1. Phase-angle control

Phase-angle control is a conventional electronic method for regulating AC voltage supplied to electrical loads. The technique employs thyristors or TRIAC-based switching arrangements to control the conduction period within each AC cycle. A microcontroller can determine the switching instant by

synchronizing its operation with the supply voltage waveform. Changing the firing angle consequently modifies the effective RMS output voltage delivered to the motor.

Three-phase AC voltage controllers generally employ semiconductor switches in each motor phase. These arrangements provide a relatively straightforward method of regulating stator voltage without requiring a complete DC-link inverter structure. Srikanth et al. investigated a three-phase AC voltage controller for squirrel-cage induction motor speed regulation using an SPWM-based approach [4]. Their work illustrates the potential of electronic voltage regulation as an alternative for applications requiring comparatively simple speed adjustment.

However, phase-angle voltage regulation introduces harmonic components into the motor supply waveform. These distortions can increase motor losses, produce additional heating, and influence the electromagnetic torque characteristics. Furthermore, reducing the stator voltage at a constant frequency may produce unsatisfactory performance when the mechanical load requires relatively constant torque. Therefore, voltage regulation should be selected according to the motor's operating characteristics rather than solely on the simplicity of its electronic circuit.

4.2. PWM-based AC voltage control

PWM-based AC voltage regulation offers another approach to controlling the effective voltage supplied to an induction motor. Unlike conventional phase-angle control, PWM techniques regulate the output through controlled switching patterns and can provide additional flexibility in waveform generation. Microcontrollers can generate these patterns through programmed timers, lookup tables, and digital switching algorithms. The resulting switching signals are applied to semiconductor devices within the AC power converter.

The implementation of microcontroller-based PWM generation was investigated by Salam and Salim [5], who demonstrated the use of a single-chip microcontroller for generating PWM signals for three-phase inverter applications. Their work highlighted the potential for reducing hardware complexity while maintaining programmable switching operation. Similar developments were reported by Dalapati and Pal [3], who investigated low-distortion three-phase sine-PWM generation using a general-purpose microcontroller. These studies demonstrate that digital switching techniques provide an important foundation for implementing flexible electronic motor controllers.

Nevertheless, PWM performance depends on switching frequency, modulation strategy, semiconductor characteristics, and the quality of the output filtering arrangement. Higher switching frequencies may improve waveform quality but can increase switching losses and thermal requirements. Conversely, insufficient switching frequency can result in greater harmonic distortion and additional motor losses. Therefore, PWM parameters must be selected by considering both inverter performance and motor operating requirements.

5. VARIABLE-FREQUENCY AND V/F CONTROL METHODS

5.1. Variable-frequency inverter control

Variable-frequency control provides a direct approach to regulating induction motor speed through an inverter. The system converts the available electrical supply into a DC intermediate voltage and subsequently generates a three-phase AC output with adjustable frequency. A microcontroller controls the inverter switching sequence and determines the required output frequency according to the reference speed. This arrangement provides substantially greater flexibility than conventional fixed-frequency voltage regulation.

Samman et al. developed a microcontroller-based three-phase inverter for induction motor speed control using power MOSFET switching devices and PWM signal generation [6]. Their experimental investigation involved motors with different rated speeds and demonstrated the ability of the controller to regulate speed under no-load conditions. The study provides direct evidence of the practical integration of microcontrollers and three-phase inverter hardware. However, its reported no-load results also indicate the importance of further investigating performance under varying mechanical loads.

A related implementation was presented by Prasad et al., who developed a three-phase induction motor control system using a PIC microcontroller and SPWM switching [7]. Their approach demonstrated the flexibility of digital control in generating inverter switching patterns and modifying operating parameters through software. Such architectures can reduce the need for extensive hardware modifications when different control strategies are required. However, the effectiveness of the system remains dependent on switching accuracy, inverter design, and the electrical characteristics of the motor.

5.2. Constant voltage-to-frequency control

Constant V/f control is one of the most widely recognized scalar control methods for induction motor drives. The method regulates the stator voltage and supply frequency together to maintain an

approximately constant magnetic flux within the motor. When the operating frequency decreases, the voltage is also reduced proportionally within the constant-torque operating region. This approach helps maintain suitable electromagnetic operating conditions while allowing the motor to operate at different speeds.

Choksi and Joshi investigated a microcontroller-based variable-frequency drive for three-phase induction motor speed regulation [8]. Their study presented experimental observations of voltage, current, and motor speed at different supply frequencies. The results demonstrated that motor speed could be adjusted by varying the inverter output frequency while simultaneously modifying voltage to maintain the V/f relationship. These findings support the suitability of microcontroller-based V/f control for relatively straightforward variable-speed applications.

Kohlrusz and Fodor compared scalar and vector control strategies for induction motors and discussed their respective operating characteristics [1]. Their analysis indicated that scalar control offers a relatively simple implementation, whereas vector control provides better opportunities for managing dynamic motor behavior. This distinction is important because conventional V/f control is generally more appropriate for applications that do not require extremely fast torque response. Consequently, selecting between scalar and advanced control methods should depend on the required dynamic performance and computational resources.

5.3. Advanced control considerations

Although conventional V/f control offers a practical solution, its open-loop implementation may experience speed deviations when the mechanical load changes. Closed-loop control can address this limitation by measuring actual motor speed and adjusting the inverter switching commands accordingly. Speed sensors, current sensors, and digital feedback processing can provide the information required for automatic correction. The integration of these components with a microcontroller creates opportunities for more accurate and responsive motor operation.

The comparison of scalar and vector control methods reported by Kohlrusz and Fodor [1] highlights the importance of control architecture selection. Vector control provides independent management of torque-producing and flux-producing current components, resulting in improved dynamic performance under demanding operating conditions. However, it requires more complex mathematical processing, accurate motor parameters, and greater computational capability. Therefore, conventional V/f control remains attractive where simplicity and implementation cost are more important than high-performance dynamic response.

6. COMPARATIVE EVALUATION OF SPEED CONTROL TECHNOLOGIES

The reviewed methods demonstrate that the selection of a motor speed-control technique depends on application requirements and motor operating characteristics. Voltage regulation offers a relatively simple and economical solution for applications with suitable load characteristics. In contrast, variable-frequency inverter control provides a wider speed-control range and better opportunities for maintaining motor flux. Microcontroller-based PWM and SPWM techniques further improve implementation flexibility by allowing switching parameters to be adjusted through software.

The principal characteristics, advantages, and limitations of the reviewed control technologies are summarized in Table 1. The comparison considers voltage regulation, PWM-based AC control, variable-frequency inverter operation, and constant V/f control. Particular attention is given to implementation complexity, speed-control capability, and practical operating limitations. Table 1 therefore provides a comparative framework for evaluating the suitability of each method in industrial and commercial applications.

Table 1. Comparison of speed control methods for three-phase induction motors

Control method	Main technology	Advantages	Limitations
AC voltage regulation	Thyristor/TRIAC controller	Simple circuit and relatively low cost	Limited speed range and reduced torque
Phase-angle control	Synchronized semiconductor switching	Easy microcontroller integration	Harmonic distortion and additional losses
PWM-based AC control	Programmable switching converter	Flexible voltage regulation	Switching losses and filtering requirements
Variable-frequency control	Three-phase inverter	Wide speed-control capability	Higher circuit complexity
Constant V/f control	PWM inverter and frequency regulation	Simple implementation and suitable for industrial drives	Limited dynamic response in open-loop operation
Vector control	Advanced digital control and inverter	Improved torque and dynamic response	Higher computational and implementation requirements

The comparison indicates that voltage-based methods are appropriate for applications where the required speed variation is relatively limited. However, frequency-based regulation is generally more suitable for industrial processes requiring adjustable operating speeds and improved torque characteristics. The use of microcontrollers provides flexibility in implementing both approaches, although their effectiveness depends on appropriate hardware selection and control algorithm design. Consequently, the choice of technology should consider operational requirements, energy consumption, electrical power quality, and total implementation cost.

7. RESEARCH CHALLENGES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Several research challenges remain important in the development of microcontroller-based three-phase induction motor controllers. The first concerns maintaining stable motor operation under changing mechanical loads, particularly when open-loop voltage or frequency regulation is employed. The second involves reducing harmonic distortion generated by semiconductor switching without significantly increasing inverter losses. The third concerns selecting microcontrollers with sufficient processing capability for accurate switching generation and real-time feedback processing. Addressing these challenges is essential for improving the reliability and efficiency of electronic motor drives.

Future research should emphasize the integration of closed-loop control, improved PWM strategies, and more efficient inverter topologies. Combining microcontroller-based V/f control with PID feedback can provide better speed regulation under varying load conditions. Further investigations could also compare different PWM techniques based on total harmonic distortion, switching losses, torque response, and overall energy efficiency. These evaluations would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the practical performance of different control architectures.

8. CONCLUSION

This review has examined the principal methods of controlling three-phase induction motor speed using microcontrollers and AC voltage-frequency regulation. The reviewed studies demonstrate that phase-angle control, PWM-based voltage regulation, variable-frequency inverter control, and constant V/f techniques offer different solutions depending on the required operating conditions. Voltage regulation provides a relatively simple and economical approach, particularly for applications with suitable load characteristics. However, variable-frequency inverter control offers greater flexibility and is generally more appropriate for applications requiring a wider speed-control range.

Microcontrollers play an important role in modern motor control by generating PWM signals, processing reference commands, and implementing automatic control algorithms. Nevertheless, effective implementation requires appropriate coordination between digital control circuits, semiconductor converters, electrical protection, and motor characteristics. The principal research gap concerns the need for comprehensive experimental comparisons under different mechanical loads using consistent performance indicators. Future developments should therefore focus on closed-loop microcontroller-based V/f control, improved switching strategies, and efficient inverter architectures. Ultimately, an effective motor speed-control system should achieve a balance between speed accuracy, torque capability, energy efficiency, power quality, and implementation cost.

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