Insight into the partial replacement of cement by ferronickel slags from New Caledonia

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ABSTRACT
We investigate the mechanical characterisation of mortars incorporating ferronickel slags (FNS) as partial substitution for cement. The studied slags come from the ferronickel production in New Caledonia. The microstructural characterisation shows that these slags are polycrystalline heterogeneous material mainly composed of forsterite, quartz and enstatite in addition to silica glass. Cement is replaced by up to 20 wt.% of ferronickel slags in the mortars. This upper level of substitution is achieved without compromising mortar’s strengths. For all mixes, the maximum compressive and flexural strengths at all curing ages is obtained with a 5 wt.% replacement of cement by ferronickel slags. The larger effectiveness of FNS is attributed to its larger silica content, which increases the polymerisation degree of the silica chains in the calcium silicate hydrate (C-S-H) structure. Slag recycling reduces the storage time, waste management and environmental impact. It significantly lowers costs related to metallurgical processing. Slag substitution for cement, also lowers the carbon footprint.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 6 May 2020
Accepted 19 August 2020

KEYWORDS
Ferronickel slag; mineralogy; Raman; cement; mortar; C-S-H; carbon footprint

1. Introduction
The French company Société Le Nickel (SLN) produces nickel since 145 years in New Caledonia (Ashok et al., 2004; Ibrahim et al., 2018). The ferronickel slags (FNS) are manufacturing wastes, which currently amount to around 2 million tons per year. At present, only 8% of the annual production is used in cement production and road construction (Nickel, 2017). A stockpile of 25 million tons of FNS is immediately available (Nickel, 2017) for recycling. As it may present environmental risks for surface and groundwater, waste reduction and/or elimination should be performed.

The FNS from SLN is chemically stable and free of harmful substances (Nickel, 2017). It provides excellent properties such as high density, hardness and toughness, good compaction with high water permeability and high fire resistance with low thermal expansion (Nickel, 2017). It is widely used as asphalt aggregate, construction materials, moulding sand and as fertilisers. FNS presents an excellent potential for construction applications in the Pacific region and particularly for Australia, taking advantage of its strategic positioning and the increasing risk of the decreasing supply of natural aggregates and other supplementary cementitious materials. This product is largely employed in road construction, waterway stabilisation, agriculture and in many other sectors (Nickel, 2017). Further industrial application of these
alternative materials would contribute to minimise the extractive quarrying of primary aggregates thereby protecting more of natural resources and landscape.

The cement and concrete industries contribute considerably to CO₂ emissions (The European Cement Association [CEMBUREAU], 2017). Cement is one of the world’s most widely used construction materials with about 4.6 billion tons of cement per year, releasing 4 billion tons of CO₂ and about 7% of the total anthropogenic carbon footprint (CEMBUREAU, 2017). The enhanced use of slag as additives in the cement manufacturing will contribute to a reduction of the CO₂ emissions.

According to literature, FNS concrete has favourable physical and chemical performances and high resistivity to chloride ion penetration (Komnitsas et al., 2009; Rahman et al., 2017). The application of slags in concrete opens up a whole range of new possibilities in the recycling of materials in the construction industry, while also reducing waste materials (Anastasiou et al., 2014). Furthermore, the incorporation of these materials could provide an added value to the cement properties. The FNS may also be used as building materials if the physicochemical characteristics are appropriate (Saha & Sarker, 2018b, 2019). In the last 50 years, studies showed that FNS are unsuitable for structural use (Ma et al., 2019; Olofinnade et al., 2016). Indeed, the valorisation of FNS in concrete has been limited to pelletised aggregates. Japan was ahead of establishing standards to use FNS in concrete aggregates or paving mixtures (Aba et al., 2010; JIS A 5011-2, 2016; JIS A 5015, 2013). Korea made a standard on FNS aggregates for concrete in the recent decades (KS F 2527, 2016). Aggregates must be inert. However, due to alkali-silicate reaction related to the silicate content in FNS, the use of high FNS content is still limited and there is no specification related to it (Saha & Sarker, 2016). Therefore, many researchers are suspicious of the FNS performance in cements as it was not proved in practice. However, in China performance-based research regarding its strength development was carried out (Mo et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2011, 2017) to use FNS as replacement of cement. Pozzolanic reaction was observed at blast furnace type of FNS (Mo et al., 2017), promoting the use of FNS as binder since the reactivity is necessary for hydration.

The FNS from New Caledonia is environmentally compatible for use in concrete due to a low amount of heavy metals leaching from it and still below the regulatory limits (Saha & Sarker, 2017). However, in these previous studies, FNS was mainly used as a substitute material for concrete aggregates and a limited number of studies are available on the use of FNS from New Caledonia as supplementary cementitious materials unlike blast furnace slag or fly ash. Some problems have been encountered related to durability aspects (Saha et al., 2018; Saha & Sarker, 2018a, 2018b, 2020). Indeed, the presence of high proportion of magnesium oxide in FNS (>30%) is reducing its application as a supplementary cementitious material. This excess of MgO lead to deleterious expansion after 2 years of curing due to the hydration reaction of MgO (Du, 2005).

The FNS of this study are the waste product of nickel laterite ore processing, in particular, saprolite at the base of the laterite profile with low Al₂O₃, low Fe₂O₃ and high MgO contents. This is of advantage, as the presence in a certain proportion of MgO and Al₂O₃ in cements (binder) reduces shrinkage-cracking in mortar and concrete. This magnesium-rich cement can lead to an autogenous expansion at early curing times and can compensate the contraction of the concrete due to shrinkage (Du, 2005). In addition, the analyses of FNS by Saha and Sarker (2018a, 2018b, 2020) showed that magnesium is incorporated in these slags as crystalline forsterite (Mg₂SiO₄) and enstatite (Mg₃Si₂O₇). The crystalline structures of forsterite and enstatite are stable and chemically inert (Klein et al., 1998) and consequently do not participate to hydration reactions that produce expansion, e.g. Mg(OH)₂ (Kosanović et al., 2005; Maghsoudlou et al., 2016). Katsiotis et al. (2015) concluded that the presence of FNS slowed down the hydration process in FNS blended concretes. In addition, the authors reported an increase of compressive strength at later curing stages due to pozzolanic reaction effects of FNS. The consumption of portlandite by the pozzolanic reaction of FNS is considered as the first reason for the reduction of expansion.

In this study, we focus on the use of FNS as a supplementary cementitious materials. For that purpose, an experimental study of the soundness and compressive strength of specimens made with slags is carried out. Five mortar mixtures using different percentages of slags (0%, 5%, 10%, 15% and 20%) are cast and tested up to failure.
2. Materials and methods

2.1. Characterisation techniques

Elemental analysis of cement was performed using X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy using an Inel Equinox 3500 spectrometer, equipped with a Cu microfocus source, parabolic multilayer mirror on the primary beam, and an Amptek X-123SDD Silicon Drift Detector placed vertically 10 mm over the sample to ensure high sensitivity even with low-atomic number elements.

The FNS chemical analysis was performed at the SARM/CRPG laboratory, Nancy (France). The major elements were analysed by ICP-OES, while trace elements (As-Zr) were analysed by ICP-MS. Sulphur and CO$_2$ were analysed by infrared absorptiometry and FeO by volumetry. The detailed methods, detection limits and precisions of the analyses are presented in the SARM-CRPG website.

X-ray powder diffraction data was performed on a D8 Advance Vario 1 Bruker (two-circle diffractometer, $\theta - 2\theta$ Bragg-Brentano mode) at room temperature and using a pure Cu K$_\alpha$ radiation ($\lambda = 1.54059$ Å) selected by an incident beam Ge (111) monochromator. Data are collected for $2\theta$ varying from 15° to 100° for 2 s per 0.01° step (2 h scan$^{-1}$). NIST SRM-660b LaB$_6$ standard powder was used to calibrate the instrumental contribution (Caglioti et al., 1958). Crystalline phase identification and quantification were performed using the Full-Pattern Search-Match procedure and the Crystallography Open Database (Grazulis et al., 2012). The Rietveld quantification was performed using the MAUD software (Lutterotti et al., 1997).

Raman spectroscopy was performed at room temperature with a Thermo Scientific DXR Raman microscope (Thermo Fisher Scientific Inc., Waltham, MA, USA) with a 532 nm laser as an excitation source. The Raman spectrometer is equipped with a 900 lines mm$^{-1}$ diffraction grating. A 50× magnification long working distance objective was used to focus the laser beam onto the surface and collect the scattered light in a backscattering geometry. Data was collected over a range of 50–2200 cm$^{-1}$. The spot size of the laser was estimated to 0.8 μm and the spectral resolution to 3 cm$^{-1}$. Raman spectra were systematically recorded twice at low laser power (1 mW) and with an integration time of 400 s. We used the Origin software and Lorentzian curves as elementary fitting functions for silica glass. The mineralogical compositions were determined by comparing the collected Raman spectra to those reported in the Raman Open Database ROD (El Mendili et al., 2019).

2.2. Materials and samples preparation

2.2.1. Cement

The cement used in this study is a CEM I 42.5 N according to NF EN 197-1 standard (EN 197-1, 2001). The clinker ratio is 95–100%. The Blaine fineness is 3200 cm$^2$ g$^{-1}$, and the density is 3.1 g cm$^{-3}$. The chemical composition is given in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Oxide</th>
<th>Concentration (wt.%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SiO$_2$</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CaO</td>
<td>61.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al$_2$O$_3$</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fe$_2$O$_3$</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MgO</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SO$_3$</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K$_2$O</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Na$_2$O</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TiO$_2$</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mn$_2$O$_3$</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss on ignition</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Values in weight.%.

Table 1. XRF analysis of CEM I 42.5 N cement.

2.2.2. Sand

A natural silica sand (SiO$_2$ = 99 wt.% H$_2$O < 0.1%) made by Société Nouvelle du Littoral (French Source, Normalised sand, Certified Conform - EN 196-1 by the AFNOR and conforms to ISO 679) was used in this study. The sand grains are uncrushed and of rounded shape.

2.2.3. Ferronickel slags

The FNS was provided by SLN (New Caledonia). The average particle size of the granulated slag is about 4 mm. Raw FNS is ground to powder (<63 μm) using high energy ball milling for 30 min (Figure 1). The specific gravity of the slag is 2.9, which is slightly lower than that of cement (~3.1).
2.2.4. Slag cement mixture

The FNS addition increases the Blaine specific surface area (SSA) of the cement powder (Figure 2). This phenomenon is due to a much larger specific surface of FNS compared to cement (6700 cm$^2$ g$^{-1}$ for FNS and 3554 cm$^2$ g$^{-1}$ for cement). However, this SSA increase is not a simple linear combination (Figure 2, dashed line) of the two constituting SSAs, indicating that some blockage of the initial specific surface of FNS by mixing with cement occurs. This blockage is neatly visible at 5% FNS probably due to less FNS particle contact during mixing for such low amounts.

2.2.5. Mortars composition

Mortars used in this study are elaborated with a water to cement ratio (W/C) fixed to 0.5, and a sand to cement ratio at 3 (Table 2). After mixing, the mortars were cast in three layers into square prism moulds (40 x 40 x 160 mm) according to EN 196-1 (Regourd, 1980). The moulds were then placed in a controlled temperature room (20 ± 1 °C) at 90% of relative humidity. The mortar specimens were demoulded 24 h after manufacturing, and then conserved in water at 20 ± 1 °C until the time of experiments.

It is important to notice that we limit the replacement level of cement by FNS to 20%. Indeed, when using higher substitution levels of cement by FNS (>20%), compressive and flexural strengths decreased dramatically, and the slump flow is very reduced.
An increase in the bulk density for all mixes is observed with increasing curing time up to 28 days (Figure 3). Increasing the slag content gradually decreases mortar density at all aging times compared to the control mortar. Since the FNS density is slightly lower than that of the ordinary cement, such an overall decrease with FNS incorporation could be interpreted as a sole effect. However, the decrease is more significant after 2 days than after 28 days. This indicates further densification during curing time for larger FNS contents.

2.3. Experimental methods

2.3.1. Fresh properties of mortars
Workability experiments were carried out on fresh mortar within the French standard NF P18-452. The experimental device consists of a compartment divided into two unequal volumes by a removable wall. The test measures the time taken for the mortar to flow from the large compartment to the smaller one under the influence of an imposed vibration.

The initial and final setting times were also measured for each mortar. These experiments consist in measuring the time necessary for a plunger assembly with a total weight of 1000 g to penetrate into the material. The initial setting time is effective when the distance between the end of plunger and the base-plate is 2.5 mm according to the NF P 15-431 standard.

2.3.2. Mechanical properties of hardened mortars
Mechanical properties of the mortars were measured using compressive and three-point bending tests in accordance to the EN 196-1 standard, on all samples from 2 to 28 days of aging. The compression tests used a loading rate of 40 N min$^{-1}$ while 3-points bending tests were displacement-controlled at a rate of 0.07 mm min$^{-1}$.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Mortars composition.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sample</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M-FNS5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M-FNS10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M-FNS15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M-FNS20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3. Variation of the bulk density of the mortars elaborated with different substitution of cement by FNS after 2 days (black) and after 28 days of aging (grey).
3. Results and discussion

3.1. Microstructural characterisation of FNS

Table 3 shows the elemental compositions of the used bulk FNS powder after grinding. The slag sample is mainly composed of about 52 wt.% of SiO2, 32 wt.% of MgO and 12.6 wt.% of total iron reported as Fe2O3. In this latter, the iron majority is divalent (FeO: 11.3 wt.%). Minor compounds are 2.3 wt.% Al2O3, about 0.5 wt.% of Na2O and MnO, 0.3 wt.% of CaO and 0.4 wt.% total H2O. CO2 is at low contents (0.16 wt.%) and K2O and TiO2 are below 0.04 wt.%

An XRD pattern of the FNS sample can reasonably be refined using four main phases (Figure 4 and Table 4). Quantitative phase analysis using Rietveld refinement indicates quartz and forsterite as the two major phases.

The weighted profile R-factor (Rwp) = 3.2% and the Bragg R-factor (Rb) = 2.2% and the Goodness of the Fits < 2 (GoF = 1.68) are reasonably low and ensure quantitative estimates of the phases and their microstructural properties.

The hexagonal closed-packed array of oxygen anions, stacked along the a direction in the structure of forsterite, is expanded and distorted compared to usual ones (Bragg & Brown, 1926; Smyth et al., 2000). Such oxygen anions occupy three different crystallographic sites, with O1 and O2 on a mirror plane and O3 in a general position. The oxygens bound to octahedral and tetrahedral cations to each other (3 and 1, respectively; Brown, 1982). Mg cations occupy Mg1 and Mg2 octahedral sites, while Si cations occupy tetrahedral sites. Mg octahedra share their edges and corners, and only corners with isolated SiO4 tetrahedra, resulting in more distorted and larger Mg2 sites compared to Mg1. Due to X-ray scattering contrasts, only Ni substitution of Mg could be probed by refinements.

Table 3. Chemical composition of FNS (wt.%) obtained by ICP-MS and ICP-OES normalised to most stable oxides.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Oxide (wt.%)</th>
<th>Element ppm</th>
<th>Element ppm</th>
<th>Element ppm</th>
<th>Element ppm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SiO2</td>
<td>51.67</td>
<td>As</td>
<td>&lt;d.l</td>
<td>Hf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al2O3</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>Ba</td>
<td>16.24</td>
<td>In</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fe2O3 (FeO)</td>
<td>12.58 (11.3)</td>
<td>Be</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>Mo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MnO</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>Bi</td>
<td>&lt;d.l</td>
<td>Nb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MgO</td>
<td>31.56</td>
<td>Cd</td>
<td>&lt;d.l</td>
<td>Ni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CaO</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>Co</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Pb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Na2O</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>Cr</td>
<td>7932</td>
<td>Rb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K2O</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>Cs</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>Sb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TiO2</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>Cu</td>
<td>9.19</td>
<td>Sc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2O5</td>
<td>&lt;d.l</td>
<td>Ga</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>Sn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>99.44</td>
<td>Ge</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>Sr</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

d.l.: detection limit.

Figure 4. X-ray diffraction pattern of a ground FNS sample refined using the MAUD software. The calculated pattern (red line) is superimposed on the observed profile (coarse line). The difference curve (Iobs – Icalc) is shown at the bottom.
Divalent cations (Ca$^{2+}$, Mn$^{2+}$ and Ni$^{2+}$) may substitute Mg in natural olivines thanks to similar ionic radii. In the case of nickel, the liebenbergite solid solution (Mg,Ni)$_2$SiO$_4$ is formed (McDonald & Whittington, 2008), inducing a small cell parameter decrease compared to pure forsterite, due to the smaller octahedral ionic radius of Ni$^{2+}$ ($r_{Mg^{2+}} = 0.71$ Å and $r_{Ni^{2+}} = 0.69$ Å; Zhang et al., 2015).

In order to be able to accurately reproduce diffracted intensities of the Ni-bearing forsterite (liebenbergite), it was necessary to use a texture model for this phase despite the fact that its texture strength is low with a maximum orientation density of the $f_{200}$ pole figure around 1.1 m.r.d (Figure 5). We used a harmonic texture model as implemented in Maud, included in the Rietveld fit. The refined texture corresponds to $\sim a$ axes perpendicular to the sample plane, with the $\sim c$/$\sim b$ axes at random around $\sim a$, i.e. a $<200>$ fibre texture component.

The refined unit-cell parameters of Ni-bearing forsterite are $a = 4.743(1)$ Å, $b = 10.181(1)$ Å and $c = 5.950(2)$ Å, while those expected for pure forsterite are $a = 4.75$, $b = 10.20$ and $c = 5.98$ Å (Smyth & Hazen, 1973), indicating clearly the cell parameters decrease. With $\sim c$ axes parallel to the edge-sharing octahedral Mg1-Mg1-Mg1 chain, modification of the Mg1 octahedron size significantly influences the $\sim c$ cell parameter (Boström, 1987), as indicated from our fits, with a smaller effect along $\sim a$ due to unoccupied every second octahedral chain in this direction (Boström, 1987).

Resulting occupancies are (in at.%) 98.3 Mg + 1.7Ni in the Mg1 sites and 99.6 Mg + 0.4Ni in the Mg2 sites (Table 4). The Mg2 sites are larger than the Mg1 sites in forsterite, which implies that the larger Mg$^{2+}$ cations (compared to Ni$^{2+}$) tend to occupy the larger Mg2 sites in olivine.

In summary, the XRD diagram of the FNS is dominated by quartz (50.9%), Ni-bearing forsterite (Ni,Mg)$_2$SiO$_4$ (29.4%), silica (13.5%) and enstatite (Mg,Fe)$_2$SiO$_3$ with some traces of Akaganeite ($\beta$-FeO$_1$ - $x$(OH)$_1$ + $x$Cl$_1$), chromite (FeCr$_2$O$_4$), calcite (CaCO$_3$; Figures 6 and 7). Forsterite is a highly stable mineral with a melting point of 1890°C (Kosanović et al., 2015).
It is known that periclase (MgO) reacts with amorphous silica at temperatures above 900 °C to form forsterite (Kosanović et al., 2005). In the presence of high quantity of quartz and silica, forsterite reacts with SiO$_2$ to form enstatite (Michel et al., 2014).

### 3.1.1. Phases detected by XRD and Raman spectroscopy

The Raman analysis has been successfully applied to a large variety of vitrified glass as encountered in the field of nuclear waste management. The structure of the silicate network in a glass is mainly determined by the degree of the silicate tetrahedra polymerisation and described by the abundance of different $Q_n$ species, where $Q_n$ referred to a tetrahedron linked by bridging oxygen atoms to $n$ adjacent tetrahedra. The range of $n$ is 0 (corresponding to isolated tetrahedra) to 4 (corresponding to fully polymerised three-dimensional network). $Q_0$ is the isolated monomer, $Q_1$ and $Q_2$ are chains and $Q_3$ and $Q_4$ reflect the interconnected structures.

Figure 6. Raman spectrum of: (a) silica deconvoluted with six Gaussians, (b) forsterite, (c) quartz and (d) enstatite.

Figure 7. Raman spectrum of (a) chromite, (b) akaganeite and (c) calcite.
Table 5. Refined centres for Gaussian functions for the Raman spectrum of silica.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Peaks</th>
<th>Vibration mode</th>
<th>Centre</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>$Q_1$</td>
<td>1010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>$Q_2$</td>
<td>940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>$Q_3$</td>
<td>880</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Si–O stretching</td>
<td>750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>O—(Ca, Mg, Si)–O bending</td>
<td>675</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>O—(Mg, Si)–O bending</td>
<td>595</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6(a) shows the spectrum obtained for the glassy-like silica structure. The best refinement of the Raman spectrum is obtained with six Gaussians (Table 5).

The Raman spectrum of amorphous silica is composed of broad peaks corresponding to the vibration modes of the $Q_1$, $Q_2$ and $Q_3$ species present at 880, 940 and 1010 cm$^{-1}$, respectively. The broad band at 595 cm$^{-1}$ is assigned to the vibration twisting and stretching modes of the Si–O–Si bonds (Galeener, 1982; Matson et al., 1983; McMillan, 1984). Other contributions are present in the spectrum, such as the vibration mode at 675 cm$^{-1}$ attributed to a poorly crystalline calcium-magnesium silicate (Deng et al., 2002; Martinez-Ramirez et al., 2006). The band at 750 cm$^{-1}$ is assigned to Si–O stretching vibration with a dominant Si motion (Matson et al., 1983). The relative proportion of $Q_3/Q_2$ is high, indicating enhancement in the number of $Q_3$ silicon sites and a high degree of polymerisation. This finding is important for using this material as a cement additive. The above described structure implies a higher degree of stiffness, strength and density of the silicate over time. In general, a higher degree of polymerisation in amorphous structures leads to higher compressive strengths (Ma et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2017). In addition, it is known that a magnesium-rich binder can lead to early strength development and durability of cementitious materials (Zhang et al., 2014).

Olivine phases have 81 optical modes but only 36 of which are Raman active (11Ag + 11B1g + 7B2g + 7B3g; Take, 1978). For forsterite (Figure 6(b)), the bands in the 800 and 1100 cm$^{-1}$ range are attributed to SiO$_4$ internal stretching vibrational modes. The features observed in that region are a doublet with peaks at 818 and 848 cm$^{-1}$ whose relative intensities are function of the crystal orientation. These vibration bands result from the coupled asymmetric and symmetric vibrations of SiO$_4$ tetrahedra. The bands in the 400–800 cm$^{-1}$ wavenumber region correspond to the SiO$_4$ internal bending vibrational modes. Bands below 400 cm$^{-1}$ are contributed by lattice modes and dominated by the rotations of SiO$_4$ tetrahedra and translations of octahedral coordinated cations (magnesium motion) in the crystal lattice (Chopelas, 1991; Kolesov & Geiger, 2004). The Raman spectrum of the forsterite present in FNS is slightly different compared to pure forsterite phase, with all Raman vibration modes slightly shifted towards lower wavenumbers (Table 6). The vibration bands shift is in agreement with the tendency observed in Ni-bearing forsterite for a small amount of Ni substituting Mg (El Mendili et al., 2019). This result is consistent with the one obtained by XRD with 2.2% of Mg$^{2+}$ replaced by Ni$^{2+}$ in octahedral sites (Figure 4 and Table 4).

Quartz crystals are formed in silica-rich slags during cooling and solidification. The Raman spectrum of such crystals (Figure 6(c)) shows the strong Raman modes of $\alpha$-quartz (462 cm$^{-1}$) corresponding to symmetric stretching of oxygen of six-membered SiO$_4$ tetrahedra, $\nu_4$(Si-O-Si) (Lin, 2004). In addition, the Raman spectrum shows the lattice modes of quartz at 206 cm$^{-1}$. Raman bands in the frequency range up to 300 cm$^{-1}$ correspond to complex translations and rotations of the SiO$_4$ tetrahedra. Raman bands in the high-wavenumber range (805 cm$^{-1}$) are assigned to the Si–O stretching motions within tetrahedral SiO$_4$ units.

Usually, orthopyroxene enstatite exhibits three ranges of Raman spectrum signatures (Figure 6(d)): (1) non-bridging and bridging Si–O modes between 970 and 1070 cm$^{-1}$ and 850 and 950 cm$^{-1}$, respectively; (2) bending Si–O modes between 500 and 600 cm$^{-1}$ and (3) bending and stretching metal-oxygen modes. Stretching vibration bands are assigned in the 970–1070 cm$^{-1}$ range, related to the non-bridging Si–O bonds (Farmer, 1974; McMillan, 1984; McMillan & Hofmelster, 1988; Sharma et al., 1983). The 650–750 cm$^{-1}$ range corresponds to the Si–O stretching modes of the bridging O atoms while the bending O–Si–O modes are present in the 500–600 cm$^{-1}$ range. In addition, two Mg–O (375–500 cm$^{-1}$) and Fe–O octahedron vibration modes (225–350 cm$^{-1}$) may appear.

3.1.2. Phases only detected by Raman spectroscopy

Chromite (Figure 7(a)) exhibits four bands for Fe–O and Cr–O bond-stretching (Reddy & Frost, 2005). The broad and very intense band at 790 cm$^{-1}$ is due to symmetric stretching $A_{1g}$(\(\nu_1\)), while the two bands at
Raman spectroscopy to prove nickel substitution in akaganeite.

Indeed, all samples present a good flow time with values between 7 and 9 s. The water amount required for FNS incorporation has no effect on the flow times for all slag-cement compositions.

3.2. Fresh state mortar properties

The use of pozzolanic materials has increased in recent years. Indeed, pozzolanic materials are generally able to react with the hydrated calcium hydroxide forming the hydrated calcium silicate (C–S–H) responsible for the strength of hydrated cement pastes. The XRD analysis shows the presence of nano-sized crystals of quartz (\(\approx 95\) nm), and thus, quartz cannot be considered as a chemically inert material (Benezet & Benhassaine, 1999a, 1999b). The pozzolanic reaction of quartz is not linked to the vitreous structure of the particles in reaction but to a dissolution-precipitation reaction of particles (Benezet & Benhassaine, 1999a, 1999b). It is barely perceptible for the particle diameters exceeding a certain critical size (\(>5\) μm) and the reduction in particle diameter will lead to a large rise in particle reactivity. Quartz, when mixed in certain proportions, improves the properties of both fresh and hard concrete such as durability, permeability and compressive, flexural and tensile strengths (Lin et al., 2018). The presence of silica glass with a high degree of polymerisation can also lead to higher compressive strength (Ma et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2017). In addition, it is known that magnesium-rich binder can lead to early strength development and durability of cementitious materials (Zhang et al., 2014).

All these results show the potential of FNS additive for producing a mortar with high performance.

### Table 6. Raman vibration modes of Ni-bearing forsterite present in the FNS compared to those of forsterite and the Ni end member, liebenbergite and their symmetries and assignments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symmetries and assignments</th>
<th>Forsterite (Martinez-Ramirez et al., 2006; Regourd, 1980)</th>
<th>Liebenbergite (Lin, 2001; Wang et al., 2004)</th>
<th>Ni-forsterite (FNS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(B_{1g}) Ti(SiO(_4) MO(_3)Cl(_2))</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>165±2</td>
<td>sh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(A_2g) Ti(SiO(_4) MO(_3)Cl(_2))</td>
<td>226±2</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>221±2 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(B_{2g}) Ti(SiO(_2)Cl(_2))</td>
<td>243±1</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>sh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(A_1g) Ti(MO(_3) SiO(_2)Cl(_2))</td>
<td>305±2</td>
<td>248±2</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(B_{2g}) R(SiO(_4)Cl(_2))</td>
<td>324±2</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>321±3 vw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(A_3g) Ti(MO(_3)Cl(_2))</td>
<td>330±1</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(B_{2g}) R(SiO(_4)Cl(_2))</td>
<td>366±3</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>299±2 w</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(B_{3g}) R(SiO(_2)Cl(_2))</td>
<td>375±1</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>326±3 vw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(B_{1g}) Ti(MO(_3)Cl(_2))</td>
<td>383</td>
<td>336</td>
<td>368±3 vw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(B_{1g}) (\nu_2)</td>
<td>435±3</td>
<td>387</td>
<td>433±2 w</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(B_{1g}) (\nu_4)</td>
<td>545±2</td>
<td>516±1</td>
<td>526±2 w</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(B_{3g}) (\nu_4)</td>
<td>593±3</td>
<td>552±3</td>
<td>585±2 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(B_{1g}) (\nu_2)</td>
<td>632</td>
<td>573</td>
<td>597±3 w</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(A_1g) (\nu_1)</td>
<td>825±1</td>
<td>811±1</td>
<td>818±1 vs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(A_1g) (\nu_3)</td>
<td>856±1</td>
<td>837±1</td>
<td>848±1 vs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(B_{1g}) (\nu_3)</td>
<td>882±3</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>876±2 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(B_{1g}) (\nu_3)</td>
<td>921±1</td>
<td>885±3</td>
<td>912±1 s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(A_1g) (\nu_3)</td>
<td>966±2</td>
<td>928±2</td>
<td>949±1 s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The symmetries and assignments are based on those reported in literature for forsterite and liebenbergite.

T: translation; R: rotation; \(\nu_1\): symmetric stretching; \(\nu_2\): symmetric deformation; \(\nu_3\): asymmetric stretching; \(\nu_4\): asymmetric deformation.

sh: should be present, vw: very weak, w: weak, m: medium, s: strong and vs: very strong.

730 and 485 cm\(^{-1}\) are attributed to \(F_{2g}(\nu_4)\) and \(E_g(\nu_2)\), respectively, and the broad band at 590 cm\(^{-1}\) to the \(F_{2g}(\nu_3)\) mode.

Figure 7(b) shows Raman bands around 308, 390, 535 and 720 cm\(^{-1}\), characteristic for Akaganeite (El Mendili et al., 2014). Akaganeite (\(\beta\)-FeO\(_x\) – 2x(OH)\(_y\) + Cl\(_z\)) is often observed as a corrosion product of carbon steel in marine environments (Monnier et al., 2010), and always contains Cl\(^-\) ions. As shown by Keller, Akaganeite can contain up to 6 wt.% chloride (Keller, 1969). It is also preferentially formed compared to lepidocrocite and goethite in environments with high concentration of Fe\(^{2+}\) and Cl\(^-\). The presence of Akaganeite in FNS results probably from the cooling of slag with seawater. Akaganeite can accommodate up to 19 wt.% of nickel in its structure (Buckwald & Clark, 1989). We did not perform Raman spectroscopy to prove nickel substitution in akaganeite.

Figure 7(c) illustrates the Raman spectrum of calcite. The strong Raman band at 1088 cm\(^{-1}\) is assigned to the \(A_{1g}\) mode. Its internal \(E_g\) mode is observed at 712 cm\(^{-1}\) and its external \(E_g\) or lattice modes occur at 282 and 156 cm\(^{-1}\) (Ait Chaou et al., 2015).

In summary, the composition of FNS are dominated by quartz, forsterite, silicate and enstatite.

3.2. Fresh state mortar properties

Our results show that slag incorporation has no effect on the flow times for all slag-cement compositions. Indeed, all samples present a good flow time with values between 7 and 9 s. The water amount required...
for the paste normal consistency slightly decreased with the inclusion of FNS (Figure 8), from around 26% of water up to 10% of FNS to around 25% for larger FNS incorporation. Consequently, the water to solid ratio (W/S) requirement of the control mix is larger than those of the mixes containing 15% and 20% FNS by a factor 1.08, indicating an 8% lower water consumption for the largest FNS mix. The water requirements of FNS are comparable to those of other supplementary cementitious materials, such as fly ash and blast furnace (Sobolev et al., 2018). The observed decrease in water requirement is due to a lower rate of slag hydration attributed to its mineralogical composition, to the presence of quartz with its low reactivity and to the amorphous silica with its high degree of polymerisation. Cement substitution by slag also reduces the amount of ettringite produced during early stages of hydration which is responsible for improvement in flowability (Sobolev et al., 2018).

Compared to the control sample, FNS-incorporated samples exhibit gradual increase in initial and final setting times (Figure 9). While these times decrease by 10% as soon as 5% of FNS is added, it reduces to 5% at 10% FNS, and becomes larger than for the control sample at larger FNS contents.

The addition of up to 10% of slags accelerates the setting time. With 15% slag replacement, the setting time is almost equivalent to that of the control specimen and beyond 15%, the initial and final setting times are extended.

Given the fixed environmental factors and the use of the same cement type, we can conclude that different setting times are the result of slag and hence reduction of the hydration rate. Indeed, the increased percentage of cement substitution by FNS increases the separation distance between hydrated

**Figure 8.** Water contents for normal consistency of cement paste with different concentrations of FNS.

**Figure 9.** Initial and final setting times of the different mortars.
cement particles, delaying then the formation of interlocking network between the particles (Lizarazo-Marriaga et al., 2011). It is important to note that FNS has a very low (0.31 wt.%) calcium content. Thus, the setting time is increased at a high percentage of cement replacement by the low calcium-containing FNS.

Replacement of less than 20 percent of FNS does not affect setting times significantly. The setting time values of all samples are in accordance with the NF EN 196-3 standard, which confirms the results obtained by the normal consistency test. At cement substitution of about 20% by FNS it was found that this latter delays both the initial and the final setting times by 18 and 28 min, respectively, compared to that of the control mix. The slight improvement at 5% and 10%, is probably due to the synergetic effect and mutual activation when compound mineral admixtures of slag powder are mixed with cement into mortar. Long setting times are usually avoided for common applications of concrete because of increased time of formwork.

### 3.3. Compressive and flexural strength of mortar

The compressive strengths of mortars after curing times of 2, 7, 14 and 28 days are shown in Figure 10. Whatever the considered formulation, the compressive strength increases with the age of the specimens. At a FNS incorporation of 10%, the compressive strength decreases. However, the compressive strength values of FNS mortars are very close at 28 and 90 days, regardless of the substitution rate, and are above 43 MPa. The maximum compressive strength values are obtained at 5% FNS for all curing times. Slag seems to act more at short curing times. Indeed, the compressive strength for the 5% FNS mortar increases, over the one of the control mortar, by 29% and 4%, respectively at 2 and 28 days. At a low replacement ratio (up to 10%), an increase in non-evaporable water occurs at an early age due to the filler effect and later because of slag hydration. For higher replacement rates, the filler effect cannot compensate for the dilution effect caused by the large incorporation of slow reacting slag particles (Castellano et al., 2016).

Figure 11 shows that the flexural tensile strengths are lower at substitution rates up to 15%. This phenomenon is due to the relatively slow pozzolanic reactivity of FNS (Papadakis et al., 2002), since it contains a high weight fraction of SiO₂. However, as for compressive strength and for all curing times, the flexural tensile strengths of the specimen with 5% of slags are larger than those of other mixes including the control mix. The flexural tensile strengths at 2 and 28 days for the 5% FNS mortar increase compared to the control mortar by 16% and 5%, respectively.

These results are consistent with those obtained for the setting time. In fact, the hydration process is accelerated at a low incorporation of 5% of FNS. This increases the mechanical strength, especially at short curing times.
The flexural strength of the different mortars correlates positively with the compressive strength. The kinetics of hardening between 2 and 28 days is the same for all specimens. The maximum flexural strength values are measured at 5% slag replacement level. The difference between these strengths and those obtained for the control mortar tends to decrease with the age of the specimens. However, the flexural strength of the 5% FNS remains larger than or equal to that of the control mortar at 28 days. It is 7.5 and 7.2 MPa, respectively.

It is important to notice that there is a significant increase in compressive strength of M-FNS5, M-FNS10, M-FNS15 and M-FNS20 specimens, compared to the CM between the 28th and the 90th days (not shown here). This confirms the pozzolanic effect of the FNS.

In order to achieve larger flexural and compressive strengths, the use of FNS powder at low substitution ratio (between 5% and 10%) is recommended.

At high substitution levels (>10%), the low flexural and tensile strengths are mainly attributed to the slow FNS pozzolanic activity, FNS being rich in SiO$_2$. This phenomenon is explained by the interaction between the reactive silica, the amorphous part of the FNS, representing 13.5% and the Ca(OH)$_2$ released by the cement hydration. The pozzolanic reaction is not predominant at short curing times. Therefore, intense hydration at young ages induces low strengths.

The results at 28 days curing time show that replacing 5% of cement by FNS, improved the compressive and flexural strengths (Figures 10 and 11). The larger compaction potential is due to the difference in particle sizes. The fine quartz and amorphous particle sizes (between 95 and 120 nm) amounting to 64.4 wt.% in the FNS slag, fill voids between the cement particles. This results in dense packing and also enhances pozzolanic reaction of silica particles.

However, when increasing the amount of SiO$_2$ powder (both amorphous and crystalline silica) above 5-10%, the compressive and flexural strengths are reduced. This is particularly due to the increase in non-pozzolanic SiO$_2$ powder particles.

The optimum of 20% FNS replacement ratio is consistent with literature finding including the study by Rahman et al. (2017), where the compressive strength value after 28 days of curing matched that of control mortar. The compressive strength development of the FNS was found comparable to those of other commonly used supplementary cementitious materials such as fly ash or ground-granulated blast-furnace slag (GGBF). For the fly ash (containing 62% of SiO$_2$), Celik et al. (2015) showed that, the mechanical strengths of mortars containing up to 20% of fly ash remain close to those of the control mortar. With the increase of the fly ash content, it is globally observed a decrease of the compressive and flexural strengths.

Mohamed (2018) studied the substitution of cement by GGBF (containing 34% of SiO$_2$) up to 80%. The results showed that the mixes in which cement was replaced with 10% to 60% GGBS matched or exceeded the 28-day compressive strength of the control mix.
3.4. Analyses of mortars by Raman spectroscopy

The Raman analyses of the mortar surface (ordinary mortar and M-FNS10) after 28 days of aging show the presence of C-S-H (Figure 12). All mortar samples (not shown here) exhibit the presence of calcite. The Raman spectra of C-S-H systems were widely studied (Garbev et al., 2007; Kirkpatrick et al., 1997). The most intense band at 670 cm\(^{-1}\) is attributed to Si–O stretching. At low wavenumbers (100–360 cm\(^{-1}\)) the lattice vibrations of the Ca-O polyhedra are observed. The band at 445 cm\(^{-1}\) is due to twisting and stretching of Si–O–Si. Bands in the 850–1200 cm\(^{-1}\) range are associated to the symmetric stretching modes of Q\(_{n}\) species in silicate (Si–O).

Comparing the Raman spectra of C-S-H formed in the ordinary mortar and in the M-FNS10, we can notice a significant decrease of the Ca-O polyhedra intensities and bandwidth. This behaviour is due to the low calcium-content (0.31 wt.%) in FNS. The Raman spectra of the C-S-H shows a decrease of Q\(_{1}\) (880–890 cm\(^{-1}\)) and an increase of Q\(_{3}\) (1080 cm\(^{-1}\)) for the M-FNS10 mortar compared to the control. This difference can be interpreted by silica layers cross linking in this sample. The Q\(_{2}\) modes (1000–1020 cm\(^{-1}\)) are also observed as a split into two main bands at 1006 and 1015 cm\(^{-1}\). This result confirms the modification of the Si–O–Si chain length by a change of the quantity of silica tetrahedron with Q\(_{2p}\) (pairing) and Q\(_{2b}\) (bridging) components (Grangeon et al., 2016). In addition, the Raman analysis shows the formation of an additional band at 1130 cm\(^{-1}\) in M-FNS10, which is attributed to the formation of the reticulated SiO\(_{2}\) networks Q\(_{4}\), and indicates a higher polymerisation degree of the silica chains in the C-S-H structure. The greater effectiveness of FNS is attributed to its higher silica content. The high silica content of FNS of about 52 wt.%, produces more C–S–H gel as a result of pozzolanic reaction. This leads to a porosity reduction and consequently to the increase in strength. Moreover, magnesium-rich binder are known to lead to early strength development and durability of cementitious materials (Zhang et al., 2014).

4. Conclusion

The effects of cement replacement by FNS on the cement paste and mortar properties were studied at different percentages. All results show that using FNS cement in mortar can improve the mortar performance. The introduction of FNS at a rate up to 10% accelerates the setting. The addition of FNS at 5% increases the compressive and flexural strengths of mortars. It is suggested that FNS can be used over this threshold, up to 20%, as a partial substitute for cement in production of mortar if a moderate of mechanical strength is acceptable. For SLN, this represents 2 million of tons of annual waste potential recycling, with around an actual stockpile of 25 million of tons straightfull available. Our results demonstrate a real potential for the use of these slags in the composition of cementitious materials.
Extrapolating this number to world’s yearly cement production scale (4.6 billion of tons), 920 million of tons of FNS can be recycled as cement additives. The substitution of cement by FNS contributes to sustainable development and ‘green deal’ goals, due to less use of cement and a significant reduction in CO₂ emissions.

Acknowledgement
ERAMET-SLN is thanked for providing the FNS from New Caledonia.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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