

A clamping device for flow module plates, reactor plates or heat exchanger plates

The present invention relates to a clamping device, a method for opening and closing a plate reactor or a flow module, and uses of the clamping device.

Background

Flow modules or reactors, which comprise plates stacked together and with plates manufactured in materials having large temperature expansion coefficient and low modulus of elasticity, operates over a wide temperature range. The large temperature expansion coefficient and low modulus of elasticity of the materials of the plates, compared to framework, screws, tension rods and end plates etc. can cause damages or leakage. Thus, one problem is to keep the tension over the whole construction within limits over the whole temperature range without causing leakage or damage on any of the parts in the module or reactor.

Another problem when working with plates is to distribute contact pressure as equal as possible over the plates to prevent unevenness and thus leakage or damaging any of the stacked plates.

The invention

Accordingly, the present invention has provided a solution to this by placing the stack of plates on a grid of springs, a so-called Winkler bed, which is placed between two end plates. By this solution can the tension rods be kept tensioned within acceptable limits. Another advantage is that the clamping forces get evenly distributed over the whole plate area of the stacked plates instead of being localised along the edges of the plates. Yet another advantage is that the bending stiffness of the end plate gets less important in the flow module or the plate reactor. A further advantage is that by measuring the compression of the springs it is

possible to monitor and control the clamping forces. Another advantage is that the force can be indirectly measured by measuring the deflection of each spring.

A further advantage is that by selecting a spring rate, which is significantly lower than the stiffness of the surrounding structure, the clamping force distribution will remain valid independently of the load distribution on the surrounding structural components. Another advantage is that it is possible to have different forces in each spring if desired.

To make the flow module or the reactor seals work properly, the clamping forces have to be within a proper range. The spring force F is a function of the spring length L . The spring length will vary within the range from $L_{\max}$ to $L_{\min}$, where $L_{\max}$ is defined as free length at unloaded spring, and $L_{\min}$ is defined as spring length at maximum compression. The maximum force $F_{\max}$ is defined as spring force at maximum compression of the spring, and the spring force will therefore vary between 0 and $F_{\max}$. The spring force F_x , which corresponds to L_x , has to be larger than force F_1 to make sure that no leakage will occur but the spring force should not be bigger than force F_2 to not risk permanent deformations. F_1 and F_2 correspond to spring lengths L_1 and L_2 , respectively, and $L_1 < L_x < L_2$. By using springs or piles of springs, with an adequate force compression curve, a sufficient working range L_2 to L_1 can be achieved. The range L_2 to L_1 must be bigger than other geometric discrepancies from manufacturing, assembly and operation. Such discrepancies can for example be manufacturing tolerances on flatness and thickness, or deformations originating from forces at assembly, or dimensional changes due to thermal expansion or material creep at operation.

The present invention relates to a clamping device comprising two end plates, springs, and tension rods, wherein the springs are arranged on a supporting element to distribute clamping forces on one or more flow module plates, one or more reactor plates, one or more heat exchanger plates, or combinations thereof, which plates are placed between the two end plates. The tension rods together with the end plates are forming a frame for the reactor plates or the flow module plates.

The spring arrangement, i.e. a grid of spring piles according to one alternative of the invention, is distributing the spring force on a stack of plates of a flow module or of a plate reactor. The flow module or the plate reactor includes one or more layers of plates stacked together. The plates can be reactor plates, flow plates, heat exchanger plates, intermediate plates etc. wherein the plates can have inserted elements or integrated elements with flow channels, Peltierelement, plates with depressions, channels or grooves, elements with cut through area or cut through channels. The plates can also be barrier plates, insulating plates, combinations of plates either integrated or separate.

Two or more tension rods may be arranged along the circumferential of the plates. The tension rods may be screwed or tightened together to compress the springs to length L_x , which is $L_x > L_{\min}$ and $L_x < L_{\max}$. The tightening of the arrangement may be manually or by aid of an actuator depending on the arrangement. The tension rods may be tightened synchronous or consecutively in small steps according to a tightening scheme. The tension rods may have fixed length or may have modular length to set several predefined fixed lengths. The predefined length may correspond to one plate, two plates up to any desired length. The modular length may be achieved by combining one or more of the predefined length tension rods. The fixed length is at least defining a

thickness of one plate or defining total thickness of several plates. According to another alternative may the tension rods be mechanic jacks or roller screws.

The spring arrangement, i.e. a grid of spring piles, can suitably be integrated in an end plate. The springs may be arranged into holes in the end plate or arranged to the end plates by pistons going through the end plate. The springs may be any type of suitable springs. One type of springs suitable is a pile of disc springs, in which the pile of discs is arranged to receive the most favourable spring force F_x .

The present invention relates also to a method for opening or closing of a flow module or of a plate reactor comprising the following steps: step (i) compressing an arrangement of springs to a length $L_x > L_{min}$; step (ii) placing a stack of one or more flow module plates, one or more reactor plates, one or more heat exchanger plates, or combinations thereof between the compressed arrangement of springs and an end plate; step (iii) tightening the tension rods and connecting the two endplates, to a length A defined as the total length between two end plates predefined by the length of the tension rods; and step (iv) releasing the compression of the arrangement of the springs.

An alternative method of the invention for opening or closing of a flow module or of a plate reactor comprises step (i) placing a stack of one or more flow module plates, one or more reactor plates, one or more heat exchanger plates, or combinations thereof between the non-compressed arrangement of springs and an end plate; step (ii) compressing an arrangement of springs to a length $L_x > L_{min}$; step (iii) placing distance blocks between one end plate and a distribution plate in a frame to set

the distance A ; and step (iv) releasing the compression of the arrangement of the springs.

The method according to both alternatives may also comprise a step (v) in which length L_x is measured for each spring for control of spring force F_x .

The method may also comprise that the compressing in step (i) and the release of the compression in step (iv) are aided by hydraulic cylinders or by an electro-mechanical or mechanical actuator.

According to a further alternative comprises the method for opening a flow module or a plate reactor comprising the following steps: step (i) compressing an arrangement of springs in a clamping device according to the invention. The arrangement of springs are compressed to a length $L_x > L_{min}$ or to a length that one or more flow module plates, one or more reactor plates, one or more heat exchanger plates, or combinations thereof can be removed; step (ii) removing one or more flow module plates, one or more reactor plates, one or more heat exchanger plates, or combinations thereof; and step (iii) releasing the compression of the arrangement of the springs.

According to a further alternative comprises the method for opening of a flow module or of a plate reactor comprising the following steps: step (i) compressing an arrangement of springs to a length $L_x > L_{min}$; step (ii) displacing distance blocks from between one end plate and a distribution plate in a frame; step (iii) releasing the compression of the arrangement of the springs; and step (iv) removing one or more flow module plates, one or more reactor plates, one or more heat exchanger plates, or combinations thereof, from the frame.

According to an alternative of the method may the tension rods be tightened simultaneously and synchronously until the correct length L_x is set. This could be done by using mechanic jacks or roller screws as tension rods with an actuator. When the correct L_x is reached must the mechanic jacks or the roller screws and nuts be locked. The actuator may be an electric motor, a hydraulic motor or any other type of motor. The synchronisation may be done by aid of a mechanical transmission or by controlling individual actuators.

The present invention relates also to a use of a clamping device to compensate for temperature expansion of a stack of one or more flow module plates, one or more reactor plates, one or more heat exchanger plates, or combinations thereof between two end plates. The present invention relates further to a use of a clamping device for opening or closing of a flow module or of a plate reactor.

When there is an increase of pressure within the flow module or the plate reactor any kind of pressure sensor sends a signal to a control unit according to one alternative of the invention. The control unit may be connected to an actuator of hydraulics, cylinders, mechanic jacks, or roller screws, which hydraulics are connected to the clamping device. When the pressure reaches a critical level or a predefined value the control unit forces the actuator to open the flow module or the plate reactor to release the pressure.

In the following will the invention be explained by the use of Figures 1 to 12. The figures are for the purpose of demonstrating the invention and are not intended to limit its scope.

Brief Description of the Figures

- Figure 1 is showing a cross view over a grid of springs supported on an end plate according to one alternative of the invention.
- Figure 2 is showing a top view of a grid of springs according to one alternative of the invention.
- Figure 3 is showing side view of a non-compressed grid of springs having length $L_{\max}$.
- Figure 4 is showing side view of a compressed grid of springs having length $L_{\min}$, the figure is also defining length A.
- Figure 5 is showing side view of a grid of springs having length L_x and how the springs are creating a seal of the flow module or the plate reactor.
- Figure 6 is showing a diagram of the function between spring force and length of the springs.
- Figure 7 is showing an alternative embodiment of the invention having a frame, which comprises two tension rods and two end plates, which frame is holding the reactor plates or the flow module plates into place by aid of hydraulic cylinders.
- Figure 8 is showing the same embodiment as in figure 7, wherein the distance blocks are in the open, or unclamped, position.
- Figure 9 is showing the same view as figure 8 of the frame with the distance blocks holding the reactor plates into place in the closed, or clamped position.
- Figure 10 is showing a side view of the same embodiment as in figure 7, in which the distance blocks are in the clamped position and the hydraulic cylinders are released.
- Figure 11 is showing a side view of a closed reactor frame without any clamped plates with a section A - A.
- Figure 12 is showing a top view of section A - A.

Detailed Description of the Figures

Figure 1 is showing a cross view over a grid of springs 1 supported on an end plate 2 according to one alternative of the invention. In this figure the springs are piles of disc springs arranged to get the adequate length and force to be able to seal the reactor or flow module. The each pile of disc springs are thread on a piston 3, which is locked on the opposite side of end plate 2 with a washer 4 and a retaining ring 5. Reactor plates 6 or flow plates 6 are tightly sealed by the aid of an end plate 7 and tension rods 8. The tension rods may have a fixed length or may be modular, to set several, predefined fixed lengths, which could correspond to the length of one, two or more plates, and each modular tension rod may be composed of the different combinations to be as flexible as possible, thus one set of modular tension rods may be use for a single plate or for couple of plates or for several plates depending on how the modular tension rods are arranged for the specific application. According to this embodiment the closing of the plate reactor or the flow module is achieved by screwing together the two end plates with the grid of springs, the plates and the tension rods. When the equipment is closed or sealed the clamping force may be measured by measuring the distance between the end plate and the ends of the spring pistons.

Figure 2 is showing a top view of a grid of springs according to one alternative of the invention. In this figure piles of disc springs 1 are forming a 3 x 7 grid of springs on an end plate 2. Along the long sides of the end plate are holes 9 for fixing the tension rods 8 to screws, which are not seen in this figure, when closing the assembly. One way of closing the assembly is to apply a grid of spring piles distributed over the plate, as shown in Figure 2, where everything is screwed together by tension rods along the circumferential of the plates. The rods are tightened evenly until the deflection of each spring pile is correct.

In Figure 3 a non-compressed grid of springs 10 having length $L_{\max}$ of the springs is shown, and the springs are thread on pistons 3. In this figure a constant is added to the length of the springs, the constant is equal to the thickness of heads 11 of pistons 3. The figure is also showing hydraulic cylinders 12, which can be used for closing and opening of the reactor or the flow module. When the flow module or the reactor is open the springs are compressed by hydraulic cylinders to a length $L_{\min}$, which can be seen in Figure 4. To length $L_{\min}$ in this figure is the same constant as in Figure 3 added. Flow plates, reactor plates, heat exchanger plates, or combinations thereof are placed between heads 11 and end plate 7, and the plates are put into place and the nuts are tightened until the clamping length is A. Clamping length A is defined as the total length between the two endplates 2 and 7. In Figure 5 it can be seen how the flow module or the reactor is closed. When the hydraulics is released then the plates are clamped. To control the forces F_x length L_x are measured for each spring pile. The length of the springs is L_x plus the same constant as in Figure 3. Length L_x correspond to spring force F_x , which is acting on the flow module or the reactor. Length L_x is changing depending on the temperature. The large temperature expansion coefficient and low modulus of elasticity of the materials of the plates, compared to framework, screws, tension-rods and end plates etc. is thus compensated for by the grid of springs which gives the assembled reactor or flow module a flexibility and damages or leakage can be prevented.

Figure 6 is showing a diagram of the function between spring force and length of the springs. By measuring the spring lengths of the grid of springs it is possible to approximate the force for each length by use of the diagram.

The diagram of Figure 6 is exemplified in Example 1, which example is for the purpose of illustrating the function between force and spring length, and is not for limiting the scope of invention.

Figure 7 is showing another alternative of the invention wherein a frame is holding the reactor plates 6 or the flow module plates 6 into place. In this figure are the plates kept in place by the force from the grid of springs and the end plates. According to this alternative of the invention distribution plate 15, and pressure plates 13a and 13b are placed between the two end plates and the reactor plates 6 or the flow module plates 6. Two distance blocks 16 are placed between end plate 7 and distribution plate 15. The distance blocks are in closed position in this figure, which can be seen in the figure where the distance blocks are placed between the end plate and the distribution plate, which is not the case when the distance blocks are in open position. The forces from hydraulic cylinders 12 can be released so that plates 6 are kept into place without the aid of hydraulic cylinders 12. The force on plates 6 can be measured by measuring the distance between end plate 2 and how far pistons 3 have reached outside end plate 2, see also Figure 10. The two end plates 2 and 7 are positioned so that the intended number of plates 6 can be entered between them when in open position. The distance between the two end plates may be adjusted by choosing the number of sleeves 17 and tightening of nuts 18 on each tension rod 8.

Figure 8 is showing the distance blocks in open position. The open position is when each block is placed on the outer sides of distribution plate 15. Figure 9 is showing the distance blocks in closed position. When the reactor or the flow module is closed distance blocks 16 are behind distribution plate 15. In Figure 10 hydraulic cylinders 12 are released from

pressure with the distance blocks placed behind the distribution plate holding the reactor or flow module in closed position.

Figure 11 is showing a side view of the frame with distance blocks in closed position behind distribution plate 15. The figure is showing a cross-section line A – A. In Figure 12 A – A is a section view of the arrangement from Figure 11 showing the frame and the grid of springs. Figure 12 is showing how distribution plate 14 can move inside a house of the grid of springs depending on the force laid upon the pressure plate by the hydraulic cylinders. Since there is no reactor plates or no flow module plates in this figure there is no force on the piles of disc springs, which result in that pistons 3 are in level with the outer side of end plate 2. If there are forces from the springs or the hydraulic cylinders the forces are redistributed by means of pressure distribution plates 14 and 15. The redistribution can be done by adding or removing material to define the contact pattern in the interface between the pressure plate and the pressure distribution plate, 13a and 15, 13b and 14 respectively. In this case a vertical groove is milled in the pressure distribution plates in all its length, creating two vertical lines of contact.

Example 1

For example could a stack of ten reactor plates according to one alternative have a total dimensional variation of $L2 - L1 = 0.6 \text{ mm}$ over a temperature range from about -40°C to about 200°C . By using a grid of tuned spring piles the forces could be held within limits for each pile, which in this case was between $F1 = 12 \text{ kN}$ and $F2 = 28 \text{ kN}$, (kN = kilo Newton).

Claims

1. A clamping device comprising two end plates, disc springs, pistons, and tension rods, wherein piles of disc springs are thread on the pistons, and the disc springs and the pistons are arranged as a grid of springs supported on one of the endplates to distribute clamping forces on one or more flow module plates, on one or more reactor plates, on one or more heat exchanger plates, or combinations thereof, which plates are placed between the two end plates, and wherein the pistons are guided through holes in the endplate having the arrangement of the grid of springs.
2. The clamping device according to claim 1, wherein the tension rods are arranged along the circumferential of the end plates.
3. The clamping device according to claim 2, wherein the tension rods are screwed or tightened together so that spring length L_x is $> L_{min}$ and $L_x < L_{max}$.
4. The clamping device according to any one of the preceding claims, wherein the tension rods have fixed length or have modular length to set several predefined fixed lengths.
5. The clamping device according to claim 4, wherein the fixed length is at least defining a thickness of one plate or defining total thickness of several plates.
6. The clamping device according to any one of the preceding claims, wherein the tension rods are motor driven mechanic jacks or motor driven roller screws.
7. The clamping device according to any one of claims 1 to 6, wherein screws are screwing together the tension rods with the two end plates having the grid of springs and the flow module plates, or the reactor plates, or the heat exchanger plates arranged between the two endplates.

8. The clamping device according to any one of claims 1 to 5, wherein each piston is locked on the opposite side of the end plate with a washer and a retaining ring.
9. A method for closing a flow module or a plate reactor comprising the following steps:
- (i) compressing an arrangement of springs in a clamping device according to any one of claims 1 to 8, wherein the arrangement of springs are compressed to a length $L_x > L_{min}$ between two end plates;
 - (ii) placing a stack of one or more flow module plates, one or more reactor plates, one or more heat exchanger plates, or combinations thereof between the compressed arrangement of springs and an end plate;
 - (iii) tightening the two endplate to a length $A > (L_{min} + \text{total thickness of the stack of plates})$;
 - (iv) releasing the compression of the arrangement of the springs.
10. A method for closing of a flow module or of a plate reactor comprising the following steps:
- (i) placing a stack of one or more flow module plates, one or more reactor plates, one or more heat exchanger plates, or combinations thereof between the non-compressed arrangement of springs and an end plate;
 - (ii) compressing an arrangement of springs in a clamping device, according to any one of claims 1 to 8, to a length $L_x > L_{min}$;
 - (iii) placing distance blocks between one end plate and a distribution plate in a frame to set the distance A; and
 - (iv) releasing the compression of the arrangement of the springs.

11. A method for opening a flow module or a plate reactor comprising the following steps:
- (i) compressing an arrangement of springs in a clamping device according to any one of claims 1 to 8, wherein the arrangement of springs are compressed to a length $L_x > L_{min}$ or to a length that one or more flow module plates, one or more reactor plates, one or more heat exchanger plates, or combinations thereof can be removed;
 - (ii) removing one or more flow module plates, one or more reactor plates, one or more heat exchanger plates, or combinations thereof;
 - (iii) releasing the compression of the arrangement of the springs.
12. A method for opening of a flow module or of a plate reactor comprising the following steps:
- (i) compressing an arrangement of springs to a length $L_x > L_{min}$;
 - (ii) displacing distance blocks from between one end plate and a distribution plate in a frame;
 - (iii) releasing the compression of the arrangement of the springs; and
 - (iv) removing one or more flow module plates, one or more reactor plates, one or more heat exchanger plates, or combinations thereof, from the frame.
13. The method according to claim 9 or 10, wherein the method also comprises step (v) measuring length L_x for each spring for control of spring force F_x .
14. The method according to any one of claims 9, 10, 11, 12 or 13, wherein the compressing and the release of the compression are aided by hydraulics.

15. A method for opening and closing a flow module or plate reactor comprising compressing and release of compression of a clamping device according to any one of claims 1 to 8, wherein the opening and the closing are aided by mechanic jacks or roller screws.
16. The method according to claim 15, wherein the mechanic jacks or the roller screws are synchronised to open or close simultaneously.
17. The method according to claims 15 or 16, wherein means are applied to secure L_x when spring compression reaches a predefined length.
18. Use of a clamping device according to any one of claims 1 to 8 for controlling temperature expansion of a stack of one or more flow module plates, one or more reactor plates, one or more heat exchanger plates, or combinations thereof between two end plates.
19. Use of a clamping device according to any one of claims 1 to 8 for opening or closing of a flow module or of a plate reactor.
20. A control system for pressure release comprising means for measuring pressure, means for opening a clamping devices according to any one of claims 1 to 8, wherein the opening of the clamping device is effectuated by a control unit connected to an actuator of hydraulics, cylinders, mechanic jacks, or roller screws.
21. A reactor frame arrangement or a flow module frame arrangement comprising tension rods, two end plates two distribution plates, two pressure plates, wherein the clamping forces are redistributed by addition of material or by removal of material to define a contact pattern in the interface between a pressure plate and a distribution plate.
22. A reactor frame arrangement or a flow module frame arrangement according to claim 21, wherein a vertical groove is milled in the distribution plates creating two vertical lines of contact.