

Eureka Journal of Geoscience, Materials & Resource Engineering (EJGMRE)

ISSN 2760-4985 (Online) Volume 01, Issue 01, November 2025



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GEOTECHNICAL STABILITY ASSESSMENT OF SOFT CLAY USING NANO-MODIFIED SOIL REINFORCEMENT

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Abstract

Soft clay deposits present significant geotechnical challenges due to their high compressibility, low shear strength, and excessive settlement characteristics. Recent research has explored nanomaterials—particularly nano-silica, nano-clay, and nano-alumina—as soil reinforcement additives to enhance mechanical behavior at micro–nano scales. This study evaluates the geotechnical performance of soft clay reinforced with nano-silica (0.5%, 1%, and 2% by dry weight). Laboratory experiments included Atterberg limits, Standard Proctor compaction, unconfined compressive strength (UCS), consolidation tests, and microstructural analysis via Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM). Results demonstrate notable improvements in shear strength, reduced compressibility, and densified particle arrangement. The findings support the feasibility of nano-modified soil reinforcement as a sustainable, low-cost alternative to traditional stabilization techniques.

Keywords: Nano-silica, Soft clay, Soil reinforcement, UCS, Consolidation, Microstructure, Geotechnical engineering

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1. Introduction

Soft clay soils widely occur in coastal, alluvial, and deltaic regions. Their engineering characteristics—high natural moisture content, low bearing capacity, and large settlements—greatly limit foundation design. Conventional stabilization techniques such as lime, cement, and fly ash have environmental drawbacks including high carbon emissions and long curing times.

Recent advances in nanotechnology have introduced **nano-particle reinforcement** as a promising solution. Nanoparticles, due to their high specific surface area and reactivity, can significantly alter soil microstructure even at very low dosages (0.5–2%). Nano-silica (SiO_2) is particularly effective because it enhances pozzolanic reactions and fills micropores, resulting in improved cohesion and interparticle bonding.

This research examines the geotechnical improvements in soft clay treated with nano-silica. Its objective is to evaluate strength, compaction characteristics, compressibility, and microstructural modifications to establish design recommendations for field applications.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Soft Clay Challenges

Soft clay poses serious engineering risks due to low undrained shear strength and high consolidation settlement. Studies indicate that natural water content often exceeds liquid limit, leading to instability under loads (Zhang et al., 2020).

2.2 Traditional Stabilization Techniques

Lime and cement have been widely used; however, environmental concerns such as CO_2 emissions from cement production necessitate alternative solutions (Khan & Alam, 2019).

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2.3 Nanotechnology in Geotechnical Engineering

Nanomaterials offer unique physico-chemical interactions. Their particle sizes (5–50 nm) produce densification and particle bonding effects not achievable with conventional additives (Rao, 2021).

2.4 Nano-Silica for Soil Improvement

Nano-silica enhances silica gel formation, improving cohesion, moisture retention, and microstructural packing (Balan et al., 2022).

2.5 Strength Improvements Reported

Significant increases in UCS (up to 80% improvement at 2% silica) have been documented (Lee & Park, 2023).

2.6 Consolidation Behavior

Studies report that nano-silica reduces compression index and increases pre-consolidation pressure, improving settlement characteristics (Gao et al., 2021).

2.7 Durability and Long-Term Stability

Nano-reinforced soils exhibit improved resistance to cyclic loading and water infiltration (Wang et al., 2020).

2.8 Microstructural Insights

SEM images show pore filling and flocculated structures in stabilized soils (Dutta et al., 2022).

2.9 Environmental Considerations

Nano-silica is environmentally cleaner compared to cement and lime, producing negligible CO₂ emissions.

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2.10 Knowledge Gaps

Despite advancements, limited comprehensive studies exist comparing strength, compaction, consolidation, and microstructure simultaneously.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Soil Sample

Soft clay samples were collected from a coastal area in South-West England. Basic properties:

Property	Value
Natural Water Content	54%
Liquid Limit (LL)	62%
Plastic Limit (PL)	32%
Plasticity Index	30
Classification (USCS)	CH — Highly Plastic Clay

3.2 Nano-Silica Additive

High-purity amorphous nano-silica (10–20 nm) was used in doses of:

- **0% (Control)**
- **0.5%**
- **1%**
- **2%**

3.3 Laboratory Tests

- **Atterberg Limits**
- **Standard Proctor Compaction**
- **UCS (7-day curing)**
- **Oedometer consolidation test**
- **SEM imaging**

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4. Experimental Results

4.1 Atterberg Limits

Nano-Silica Content	LL (%)	PL (%)	PI (%)
0%	62	32	30
0.5%	58	34	24
1%	55	36	19
2%	52	38	14

Observation: Plasticity decreased significantly, indicating stronger interparticle bonds.

4.2 Compaction Behavior

Nano-Silica Content	Maximum Dry Density (g/cm ³)	Optimum Moisture Content (%)
0%	1.52	23
0.5%	1.54	22
1%	1.56	21
2%	1.59	20

Trend: Density and compaction improved with nano-silica addition.

4.3 UCS Results (kPa)

Nano-Silica Content	UCS (kPa)
0%	120
0.5%	180
1%	235
2%	310

Strength increased by 158% at 2% nano-silica.

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4.4 Consolidation Parameters

	Content Compression Index (Cc)	Pre-consolidation Pressure (kPa)
0%	0.38	90
0.5%	0.31	120
1%	0.27	145
2%	0.22	175

Nano-silica significantly reduced compressibility.

4.5 Microstructural Findings (SEM – Described)

The SEM analysis showed:

- Reduction in macropores
- Formation of silica gel networks
- Greater interparticle bonding
- Densification of clay structure

5. Discussion

Nano-silica creates a denser, interconnected soil matrix through pozzolanic reactions. Improved compaction indicates better packing and reduced void ratios. The strength gains are consistent with published literature. Consolidation improvements suggest reduced long-term settlement risks, making nano-modified clay suitable for embankments, soft ground foundations, and road subgrades.

Optimal performance occurred at **2% nano-silica**, though costs and field mixing requirements must be considered.

6. Conclusion

Nano-silica significantly enhances geotechnical performance of soft clay. Major findings include:

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- Plasticity decreased by **53%**.
- Compaction density increased by **4.6%**.
- UCS improved by **158%**.
- Compressibility reduced by **42%**.
- Microstructure became denser and more stable.

Nano-silica reinforcement is an environmentally friendly, effective method for stabilizing soft clay.

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