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Confinement of an alkaline environment for electrocatalytic CO₂ reduction in acidic electrolytes†

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Acidic electrochemical CO₂ reduction reaction (CO₂RR) can minimize carbonate formation and eliminate CO₂ crossover, thereby improving long-term stability and enhancing single-pass carbon efficiency (SPCE). However, the kinetically favored hydrogen evolution reaction (HER) is generally predominant under acidic conditions. This paper describes the confinement of a local alkaline environment for efficient CO₂RR in a strongly acidic electrolyte through the manipulation of mass transfer processes in well-designed hollow-structured Ag@C electrocatalysts. A high faradaic efficiency of over 95% at a current density of 300 mA cm⁻² and an SPCE of 46.2% at a CO₂ flow rate of 2 standard cubic centimeters per minute are achieved in the acidic electrolyte, with enhanced stability compared to that under alkaline conditions. Computational modeling results reveal that the unique structure of Ag@C could regulate the diffusion process of OH⁻ and H⁺, confining a high-pH local reaction environment for the promoted activity. This work presents a promising route to engineer the microenvironment through the regulation of mass transport that permits the CO₂RR in acidic electrolytes with high performance.

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Introduction

Converting CO₂ into value-added chemical feedstocks and fuels through the electrochemical CO₂ reduction reaction (CO₂RR) driven by renewable electricity is an appealing pathway to develop a sustainable carbon cycle.^{1–3} In order to boost the catalytic activity, alkaline or neutral electrolysis systems are widely employed to suppress the competing hydrogen evolution reaction (HER), which could also promote CO₂ activation and C–C coupling.^{4–9} However, the inevitable reaction between CO₂ and local/bulk OH⁻ in alkaline or neutral electrolytes would lead to undesired CO₂ consumption and crossover.^{10–12} This phenomenon results in low carbon utilization efficiencies (≤50% for C₁ products and ≤25% for C₂₊ products) and limited energy efficiencies.^{13–16} Furthermore, the stability of alkaline CO₂RR systems could be significantly

lowered due to the accumulation of the generated carbonate.^{13,17} Therefore, it is essential to develop efficient CO₂RR systems with high CO₂ utilization efficiency and good stability.^{18,19}

Among the emerging strategies to achieve this goal, acidic CO₂RR has received considerable attention.^{20,21} Due to the high proton concentration and the use of a proton exchange membrane (PEM), the CO₂RR in acidic media offers a viable approach to reduce the formation of carbonate and eliminate CO₂ crossover.²² Therefore, acidic CO₂RR can break the theoretical limitation of single-pass carbon efficiency (SPCE) for alkaline CO₂RR with less energy cost for product separation.^{23,24} Without the accumulation of carbonate, long-term stability can also be improved in acidic systems. Furthermore, higher conductivity and the economic feasibility of PEMs also make it promising for industrialization.^{16,25} However, the kinetically favored HER is normally predominant in acidic electrolytes, which leads to a low faradaic efficiency (FE) of CO₂RR products.^{15,26} Therefore, it is imperative to suppress the severe HER to improve the practical viability of acidic CO₂RR.

The suppression of the HER in acidic media can be realized by the design of appropriate electrocatalysts. Bimetallic catalysts have been proven to modulate CO* coverage and weaken H* adsorption through adsorbate–adsorbate interactions, thus inhibiting the HER.²⁷ Meanwhile, the CO₂RR can be further enhanced by modifying the catalyst surface with basic sites to promote CO₂ adsorption.^{20,28} Besides the design of novel catalysts, the optimization of the microenvironment is equally critical to render acidic CO₂RR feasible.^{29–34} For instance, a hydrophobic chemical environment has been proven to benefit the CO₂RR due to the high local CO₂/

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H₂O ratio in the gas diffusion electrode (GDE).^{23,35} It can be realized by adding polytetrafluoroethylene nanoparticles into the catalyst layer. According to recent studies, the H⁺ coverage close to the cathode surface was sensitive to the K⁺ concentration due to the competitive adsorption of cations at the outer Helmholtz plane (OHP), and thus concentrating potassium cations in the vicinity of active sites could promote the performance of the CO₂RR.^{16,24,36,37}

Besides, controlling the formation rate of CO/OH⁻ to compensate for the diffusion of protons from the bulk electrolyte and coating the catalyst layer with a nanoporous ion-regulatory layer to suppress the diffusion of K⁺ and OH⁻ are effective ways to lower the concentration of protons near the catalyst surface.^{38,39} In these cases, the competitive HER from proton reduction can be effectively suppressed. Meanwhile, the crossover of CO₂ is minimized because any locally generated carbonate can be converted back to CO₂ by the adequate protons in the bulk acidic electrolyte.⁴⁰ Overall, engineering the local reaction environment through suitable catalyst design is essential for promoting acidic CO₂RR.

In this study, Ag@C electrocatalyst with Ag active sites loaded on the interior surface of hollow carbon spheres was designed, which exhibits a CO FE (FE_{CO}) of over 95% even in a strongly acidic electrolyte (pH 1.1) with improved stability. An SPCE of 46.2% was achieved at a CO₂ flow rate of 2 standard cubic centimeters per minute (scm) in virtue of the inhibited carbonate formation in acidic CO₂RR. Computational modeling demonstrated that the diffusion of OH⁻ through the hollow spheres was limited due to the presence of the porous carbon layer. Thus, the enrichment of OH⁻ in the nanochamber brought a local alkaline environment that can effectively suppress the HER. This work highlights the importance of mass transport manipulation in engineering the reaction microenvironment for high-performance CO₂RR.

Results and discussion

Synthesis and characterization of electrocatalysts

The synthetic procedure of Ag@C catalysts is illustrated in Fig. 1a. First, SiO₂ spheres with an average size of ~400 nm were synthesized as templates (Fig. S1a†). Subsequently, Ag nanoparticles were loaded on the surface of SiO₂ to obtain SiO₂@Ag (Fig. S1b†).⁴¹ A modified Stöber coating method was adopted to fabricate SiO₂@Ag@resorcinol-formaldehyde (SiO₂@Ag@RF) spheres with a core-shell structure (Fig. 1b).⁴² Then, SiO₂@Ag@C was obtained after a calcination process under an inert atmosphere, during which RF was converted to carbon at an elevated temperature. Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) and transmission electron microscopy (TEM) images of SiO₂@Ag@C show the full coverage of the carbon shell without Ag particles left on the outer surface (Fig. 1c and d). The as-prepared SiO₂@Ag@C was finally converted into Ag@C *via* a chemical etching treatment. TEM observation indicates the retention of a hollow spherical morphology with a shell thickness of ~40 nm after the successful removal of the SiO₂ cores. The Ag particles (average diameter ≈ 16.1 nm) are confined inside the carbon spheres (Fig. 1e). As shown in the high-resolution TEM (HRTEM) images, the lattice spacing of the Ag@C

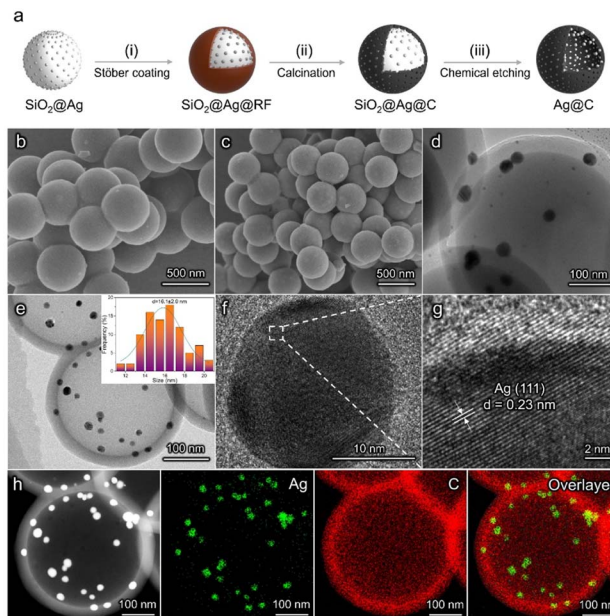


Fig. 1 Schematic illustration and morphological characterization. (a) Scheme of the synthesis process of the Ag@C catalyst. (b) SEM image of SiO₂@Ag@RF. (c) SEM and (d) TEM images of SiO₂@Ag@C. (e) TEM and (f and g) HRTEM images of Ag@C. The inset in (e) is the particle size distribution of Ag. (h) Energy-dispersive spectroscopy (EDS) elemental mapping images of Ag@C.

catalyst corresponds to the (111) facet of Ag (Fig. 1f and g). The elemental mapping images of Ag@C further reveal that Ag nanoparticles are located on the inner surface of the carbon shell (Fig. 1h). The structural feature of the carbon shell was studied using N₂ adsorption-desorption measurements (Fig. S2†). The Ag@C catalyst shows a porous structure with an average pore size of about 2.6 nm, which ensures sufficient reactants near the surface of the active sites (Fig. S3†). Conventional Ag/C catalysts without a core-shell structure were synthesized as the control sample (Fig. S5†). X-ray diffraction (XRD) patterns indicate the presence of metallic Ag in Ag@C and Ag/C catalysts (Fig. S6†). X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) measurements were performed to further confirm the chemical state of the Ag active sites (Fig. S7†). The Ag 3d_{5/2} peak at 368.2 eV was observed, implying that the metallic Ag is the active phase in both catalysts. Both Ag@C and Ag/C catalysts possess approximately the same mass loadings (~40%) and similar Ag nanoparticle sizes (insets of Fig. 1e, insets of Fig. S5a and Table S1†). Meanwhile, the Raman intensity ratios between D and G bands in both catalysts are similar, which implies the consistent properties of the carbon supports (Fig. S8†).⁴² In addition, a C@Ag catalyst with active sites loaded on the outer surface of a porous carbon layer was prepared to further demonstrate the importance of the unique structure of the Ag@C catalyst in enhancing the acidic CO₂RR performance (Fig. S9†). The preparation of C@Ag followed a similar synthesis procedure to the Ag@C catalyst.



CO₂ electroreduction in alkaline and acidic media

The CO₂RR performance was evaluated in a typical three-electrode flow cell reactor. The flow rate of electrolyte was kept constant for all the tests. As shown in Fig. 2a, both Ag@C and Ag/C catalysts exhibited a similar FE_{CO} of over 90% in the current range of 50 to 300 mA cm⁻² in the alkaline electrolyte (1.0 M KOH, pH 13.7), which is consistent with previous reports.^{5,43,44} This result shows that an alkaline environment is beneficial for the suppression of the HER. Besides, the catalytic activity of Ag@C was tested at different CO₂ flow rates from 50 to 2 sccm in the alkaline electrolyte at 200 mA cm⁻² (Fig. 2b). As the flow rate decreased, the FE_{CO} showed an apparent drop due to the rapid depletion of CO₂ to CO₃²⁻/HCO₃⁻ (Fig. S10[†]). A relatively low maximum SPCE of 20.7% was achieved at 4 sccm.

As mentioned above, acidic CO₂RR may offer a viable solution to improve the carbon utilization efficiency by minimizing the formation and crossover of carbonate. After the preliminary tests in mildly acidic media (Fig. S11[†]), the CO₂RR was further performed under strongly acidic conditions to investigate the feasibility of the Ag@C catalyst (Fig. 2c and d). An acidified 0.5 M K₂SO₄ solution with a pH of around 1.1 was employed as the catholyte to ensure consistent cation concentrations in both acidic and alkaline electrolysis. Besides, a relatively high electrolyte concentration contributes to the reduction of cathodic ohmic loss (Fig. S12[†]). As shown in Fig. 2c, the Ag@C catalyst displayed a FE_{CO} of over 95% at a current density of 300 mA cm⁻², which is comparable to the performance under alkaline conditions. Meanwhile, the activity of Ag@C significantly exceeded that of Ag/C and C@Ag catalysts over the whole tested current density range (Fig. S13[†]). More importantly, the Ag@C catalyst exhibited relatively high FE_{CO} even at low CO₂ flow rates (Fig. 2d). A high SPCE of 46.2% was achieved at 2 sccm in the

acidic media, implying the advantage in minimizing carbonate formation compared with the alkaline system.

Stable operation is essential to ensure the CO₂RR to be economically competitive for practical application. The stability of Ag@C in acidic and alkaline systems was examined under a constant current density of 100 mA cm⁻² (Fig. 3a). An apparent deactivation of the alkaline CO₂RR system was observed due to the precipitation of carbonate salt, as evidenced by the observation of the obvious salt on the backside of the gas diffusion electrode (GDE, Fig. 3b–d). In contrast, the FE_{CO} was maintained over 90% during ~9 h of electrolysis in the acidic electrolyte. Post characterization studies demonstrate that the hollow structure of the Ag@C catalyst was well retained with negligible changes in composition (Fig. S14–S16[†]). The XPS data indicate the retention of metallic Ag after the long-term test (Fig. S17[†]), which excludes the effect of chemical state change of Ag active sites on the catalytic stability. Meanwhile, the outlet electrolyte was measured by inductively coupled plasma optical emission spectrometry (ICP-OES) after the durability test under acidic conditions. No dissolved Ag was detected (Table S2[†]). Therefore, the slight decline in FE_{CO} may result from the wetting of the gas diffusion layer (GDL) as suggested by Fig. 3e–g. In addition, only a minor shift in catholyte pH was observed after the long-term test in the acidic electrolyte (inset of Fig. 3a), which indicates that the stability of the electrolyte environment may also facilitate the stable operation of the whole electrolysis system. Furthermore, the stability of Ag/C in 0.5 M K₂SO₄ (pH 1.1) was also measured. The gradual increase of FE_{H₂} due to the severe flooding was also observed in the Ag/C catalyst (Fig. S18a[†]). And the TEM image after the long-term test shows no significant change in the catalyst morphology and the



Fig. 2 CO₂RR performance in alkaline and acidic media. (a) FE_{CO} on Ag@C and Ag/C at different current densities in 1.0 M KOH (pH 13.7). (b) FE_{CO} and corresponding SPCE on Ag@C at 200 mA cm⁻² with different CO₂ flow rates in 1.0 M KOH. (c) FE_{CO} on Ag@C and Ag/C at different current densities in 0.5 M K₂SO₄ (pH 1.1). (d) FE_{CO} and corresponding SPCE on Ag@C at 200 mA cm⁻² with different CO₂ flow rates in 0.5 M K₂SO₄ (pH 1.1). Error bars represent the standard deviation from at least three independent measurements.



Fig. 3 Stability performance of Ag@C in acidic and alkaline media. (a) Long-term performance of the CO₂RR at 100 mA cm⁻² in alkaline (1.0 M KOH, pH 13.7) and acidic (0.5 M K₂SO₄, pH 1.1) electrolytes. Inset shows the pH variation of the catholyte with time. (b) Photograph and (c and d) SEM images of the backside of the GDE after the stability test in 1.0 M KOH. (e) Photograph and (f and g) SEM images of the backside of the GDE after the stability test in 0.5 M K₂SO₄ (pH 1.1). (h) Schematic of the local reaction environment and ion transport on the Ag@C catalyst.



Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

Acknowledgements

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