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$WO_3/BiVO_4$ photoanode coated with mesoporous Al_2O_3 layer for oxidative production of hydrogen peroxide from water with high selectivity†

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A $WO_3/BiVO_4$ photoanode coated with various metal oxides demonstrated high selectivity (faradaic efficiency) for hydrogen peroxide (H_2O_2) generation from water (H_2O) under irradiation of simulated solar light in a highly concentrated hydrogen carbonate ($KHCO_3$) aqueous solution. A mesoporous and amorphous aluminium oxide (Al_2O_3) layer significantly facilitated inhibition of the oxidative degradation of generated H_2O_2 into oxygen (O_2) on the photoanode, resulting in unprecedented H_2O_2 selectivity (*ca.* 80%) and the accumulation (>2500 μM at 50C).

Chemical conversions using light energy have been performed in various fields since the discovery of the Honda–Fujishima effect.[1–25] Significant efforts have recently been devoted to H_2 production by water splitting using inexhaustible light for clean energy conversion processes.[1–4,8–29] Photoelectrode systems are widely recognised as a promising technology for H_2 production because they operate at an electrolysis voltage lower than the theoretical electrolysis voltage of water (<1.23 V).[1,8–29] Visible light-responsive oxide photoanodes with a narrow bandgap energy, such as WO_3, $BiVO_4$ and Fe_2O_3, are desirable for the efficient utilisation of solar light and economical synthetic processes.[8–29] Most importantly, numerous efforts have been focused on $BiVO_4$ photoanodes capable of utilising a wide range of light energy (~520 nm) and achieving efficient O_2 generation by water splitting.[9–21,28,29,32] A $WO_3/BiVO_4$ photoanode that combines $BiVO_4$ with a WO_3 underlayer for the efficient transfer of excited electrons on $BiVO_4$ to the F-doped SnO_2 conductive glass (FTO) substrate shows exceptional photoelectrochemical performance for water splitting into H_2 and O_2.[10–13,17–20,28,29,32] However, most previous investigations, containing electrochemical reactions, focused solely on the recovery of H_2 energy generated on the cathode and little attention was paid to the recovery of the oxidation products simultaneously evolved during water splitting.[24–31]

H_2O_2 is an especially versatile and clean oxidation product having the potential to generate instead of O_2 from H_2O (eqn (1)).

$$2H_2O \rightarrow H_2O_2 + 2H^+ + 2e^- \ (E(H_2O_2/H_2O) = +1.77 \text{ V } \textit{vs.} \text{ RHE}) \quad (1)$$

However, the accumulation of H_2O_2, generated oxidatively is extremely difficult because degradation of H_2O_2 into O_2 also occurs easily and oxidatively in a conventional photoelectrochemical system *i.e.* the redox potential of H_2O_2 degradation is more negative than the redox potential of H_2O_2 production from H_2O (eqn (1) and (2)), resulting in low selectivity for oxidative H_2O_2 generation.

$$H_2O_2 \rightarrow O_2 + 2H^+ + 2e^- \ (E(O_2/H_2O_2) = +0.68 \text{ V } \textit{vs.} \text{ RHE}) \quad (2)$$

Recently, we reported that a photoelectrochemical system combining the $WO_3/BiVO_4$ photoanode and aqueous electrolyte of $KHCO_3$ under CO_2 bubbling could achieve simultaneous generation and accumulation of H_2O_2 and H_2 from H_2O (eqn (3)).[28,29] In this system, the aqueous electrolyte of $KHCO_3$ acts as an excellent oxidative catalyst for generating H_2O_2 from H_2O. Moreover, H_2O_2 could be produced at no external bias on both a $WO_3/BiVO_4$ photoanode (from H_2O) and an Au cathode (from O_2) *via* a two-photon process (eqn (4)).[29]

$$2H_2O \rightarrow H_2O_2 + H_2 \text{ (two-photon process)} \quad (3)$$

$$2H_2O + O_2 \rightarrow 2H_2O_2 \text{ (two-photon process)} \quad (4)$$

Although the selectivity (faradaic efficiency: $\eta(H_2O_2)$) of reductive H_2O_2 production from O_2 on cathodes such as Au was very high, almost 100%, the maximum selectivity ($\eta(H_2O_2)$) for oxidative H_2O_2 production on $WO_3/BiVO_4$ photoanodes was still

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† Electronic supplementary information (ESI) available: Experimental section, SEM images, XRD spectra, LHE spectra, applied voltage properties, *I–V* characteristic of photoanodes, pore size distribution of the MeO_x particles, effect of Al_2O_3 amount on $WO_3/BiVO_4$ and dependence of applied voltage. See DOI: 10.1039/c7ra09693c

low, only *ca.* 54%. The design of novel photoanodes capable of achieving efficient H_2O_2 generation and inhibiting oxidative degradation of generated H_2O_2 is absolutely imperative for building a clean and breakthrough technology, by accumulating H_2O_2 and H_2 with unprecedented H_2O_2 selectivity using only H_2O as the raw material.

Here, we focused on a surface modification of the metal oxide (MeO_x) layers on the $WO_3/BiVO_4$ photoanode surface to achieve excellent selectivity of generation and accumulation of H_2O_2 in the $KHCO_3$ aqueous solution under simulated solar light irradiation (Fig. 1). The MeO_x layers were prepared by spin-coating of metal organic solutions and calcination. Introducing a porous Al_2O_3 layer was found to specifically permit oxidative H_2O_2 generation and accumulation with exceptional selectivity in an aqueous $KHCO_3$ electrolyte because of the blocking effect of oxidative degradation of the generated H_2O_2 into O_2 on the photoanode.

Details regarding experimental procedures for preparation and photoelectrochemical reactions of photoanodes are provided in the ESI†.

The effects of MeO_x layers, modified on the $WO_3/BiVO_4$ photoanode, for oxidative H_2O_2 generation properties were investigated at an applied electric charge of 0.9C (900 s at steady photocurrent of 1 mA) in a 0.5 M $KHCO_3$ aqueous electrolyte. As shown in Fig. 2, all MeO_x-coated photoanodes, except CoO_x, enhanced the oxidative H_2O_2 generation compared to a bare $WO_3/BiVO_4$ photoanode, and the enhanced effect, ranked by the modified metal oxide, was $Al_2O_3 > ZrO_2 > TiO_2 > SiO_2 >> CoO_x$. Little H_2O_2 was observed on the CoO_x coated photoanode, because CoO_x probably decomposed the generated H_2O_2 quickly, or O_2 may be evolved on CoO_x directly. It should be noted that the Al_2O_3 modification on the $WO_3/BiVO_4$ photoanode achieved roughly twice the oxidative H_2O_2 generation compared to the bare $WO_3/BiVO_4$ photoanode. The Al_2O_3 uniformly, smoothly and flatly covered the entire area of the $WO_3/BiVO_4$ photoanode as shown in the SEM images (Fig. 3), whereas other MeO_x were granularly and uniformly supported on that and possessed any crack holes (Fig. S1; ESI†). It was also confirmed, from XRD measurement (Fig. S2; ESI†), that no

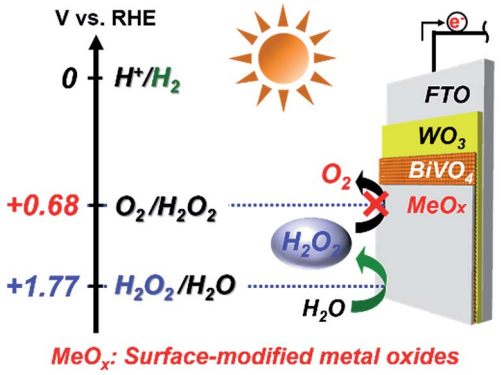

Fig. 1 Pattern and energy diagrams for photoelectrochemical H_2O_2 generation from H_2O on $WO_3/BiVO_4/MeO_x$ photoanodes under solar light irradiation.

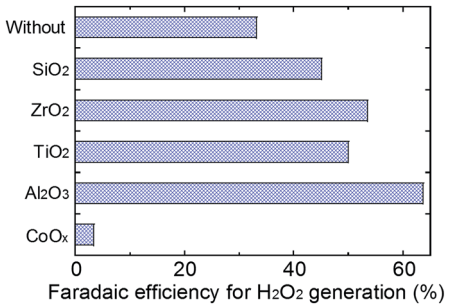

Fig. 2 Oxidative H_2O_2 generation on photoanodes ($WO_3/BiVO_4/MeO_x$) modified various metal oxides on a $WO_3/BiVO_4$ at an electric charge of 0.9C (900 s at steady photocurrent of 1 mA) in a 0.5 M $KHCO_3$ aqueous electrolyte (35 mL) in an ice bath (below 5 °C) under simulated solar light.

diffraction peaks derived from MeO_x were observed in all $WO_3/BiVO_4/MeO_x$ photoanodes, suggesting that all tried MeO_x modified on $WO_3/BiVO_4$ photoanode possess amorphous-like structure. As shown in Fig. S3; ESI,† little change of the light harvesting efficiency (LHE) was also confirmed in tried all photoanodes, suggesting that these MeO_x introduced on the $WO_3/BiVO_4$ have little effect to light absorption efficiency on $WO_3/BiVO_4$ photoanode. The time courses of voltages applied between photoanode and a counter electrode of Pt mesh at steady photocurrent of 1 mA (Fig. 2) in oxidative H_2O_2 generation reaction were also confirmed (Fig. S4; ESI†). The voltages for applying steady photocurrent of 1 mA slightly increased by introducing MeO_x on the $WO_3/BiVO_4$ photoanode. In particular, $WO_3/BiVO_4/Al_2O_3$ photoanode, coated uniformly, smoothly and flatly at Al_2O_3 compared to other MeO_x, required highest applied voltage. In order to confirm the effect introducing the Al_2O_3 on the photoanode in more detail, the photocurrent property of the $WO_3/BiVO_4/Al_2O_3$ photoanode was investigated in a 0.5 M $KHCO_3$ aqueous solution (Fig. S5; ESI†). The bare $WO_3/BiVO_4$ photoanode exhibited excellent photocurrent property in all applied voltage ranges as with our past reported example,[11,12,28,29] and the photocurrent property slightly decreased by introducing the Al_2O_3 layer. However, it should be noted that the decreasing degree of the photocurrent property was slight, only *ca.* 9% and 5% at +1.23 V and +1.77 V *vs.* RHE, respectively, although the Al_2O_3, having an insulation property, covered the entire area of the $WO_3/BiVO_4$ photoanode. A similar

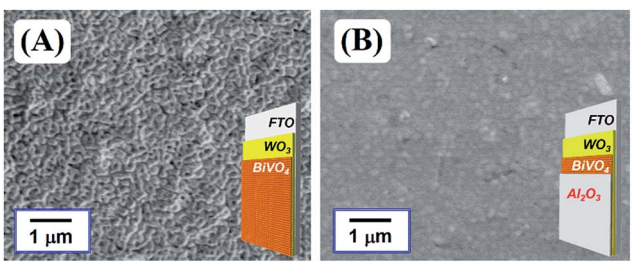

Fig. 3 SEM images of (A) $WO_3/BiVO_4$ and (B) $WO_3/BiVO_4/Al_2O_3$ photoanodes.

phenomenon has also been observed in O_2 and H_2 generation through water splitting on a photoanode coated with amorphous-like Ta_2O_5.[32] In addition, it was confirmed, from the N_2 absorption and desorption measurement of MeO_x particles (Fig. S6; ESI†), that almost all MeO_x possess mesoporous structure at a pore size of *ca.* 4–20 nm. In particular, a pore size of the Al_2O_3 was *ca.* 4.7 nm. The thicknesses of Al_2O_3 calculated from the coating amount on the $WO_3/BiVO_4$ photoanode by XRF measurement were *ca.* 100 nm (0.055 mg cm^{-2}). In order to also investigate the effects of dense Al_2O_3 on $WO_3/BiVO_4$ on the oxidative H_2O_2 generation, increasing Al_2O_3 amount on $WO_3/BiVO_4$ photoanode was performed by decreasing the spin coating number (500 rpm) of precursor solution of EMOD solved in butyl acetate containing ethylcellulose when introducing Al_2O_3 layers. The thickness of Al_2O_3 introduced at 500 rpm calculated from the XRF measurement was *ca.* 127 nm (0.070 mg cm^{-2}), suggested that the thickness increases with decreasing the spin coating number. As shown in Fig. S7; ESI,† little change of the H_2O_2 generation amounts was observed on these $WO_3/BiVO_4/Al_2O_3$ photoanodes prepared at 500 and 1000 rpm, indicating that increasing Al_2O_3 on $WO_3/BiVO_4$ photoanode has little effect on the oxidative H_2O_2 generation. In subsequent experiments, $WO_3/BiVO_4/Al_2O_3$ photoanode prepared at 1000 rpm was utilized as the photoanode. These results indicate that the specific effect enhancing oxidative H_2O_2 generation property was achieved on the $WO_3/BiVO_4$ though the mesoporous and amorphous Al_2O_3 layer covered uniformly, smoothly and flatly the entire area.

To track the specific performance enhancing effect of generating H_2O_2 by introducing the Al_2O_3 layer, the concentration dependency of $KHCO_3$ aqueous electrolytes on the oxidative H_2O_2 generation property was investigated at an applied electric charge of 0.9C (Fig. 4(A)). We have already reported that the oxidative H_2O_2 generation property on the $WO_3/BiVO_4$ photoanode was improved with increasing concentration of $KHCO_3$, which acts as an effective catalyst for H_2O_2 generation *via* the two-electron oxidation of H_2O.[28] Even in the case of using the $WO_3/BiVO_4/Al_2O_3$ photoanode, the selectivity ($\eta(H_2O_2)$) for H_2O_2 generation was significantly enhanced with increasing concentration of $KHCO_3$, and the $\eta(H_2O_2)$ in the 2.0 M $KHCO_3$ aqueous solution reached *ca.* 80% at 0.9C, whereas that using the bare $WO_3/BiVO_4$ photoanode was *ca.* 54%. It should be noted that the selectivity ($\eta(H_2O_2)$ = *ca.* 53%) on the $WO_3/BiVO_4/Al_2O_3$ photoanode in lowly concentrated $KHCO_3$ (0.1 M) was comparable to that (*ca.* 54%) on the bare $WO_3/BiVO_4$ photoanode in highly concentrated $KHCO_3$ (2.0 M). This suggests that the Al_2O_3 could effectively be contributing to oxidative H_2O_2 generation from H_2O even in the lowly concentrated $KHCO_3$. Moreover, as shown in Fig. 4(B), the excellent H_2O_2 generation property on the $WO_3/BiVO_4/Al_2O_3$ photoanode compared to the $WO_3/BiVO_4$ photoanode was significantly maintained even at high electric charge up to 50C. As a result, the accumulation amount, using the $WO_3/BiVO_4/Al_2O_3$ photoanode, reached >2500 μM at 50C, while that using the bare $WO_3/BiVO_4$ photoanode was >1300 μM at 50C. The dependency of the applied voltage on the oxidative H_2O_2 generation was investigated to confirm the effect of the Al_2O_3 coating in detail (Fig. S8; ESI†). A small change in H_2O_2 generation performance was observed in all ranges of applied voltages (0.8–1.8 V), suggesting that the enhanced effect of introducing an Al_2O_3 layer is independent of the voltages applied between a photoanode as the working electrode and a Pt mesh as counter electrode using the aqueous electrolyte of the $KHCO_3$.

Although little development with regards to highly selective H_2O_2 generation *via* two-photon oxidation of H_2O and accumulation using photoanodes has been reported, our method of Al_2O_3 coating on the $WO_3/BiVO_4$ photoanode produced tremendous improvement in selective H_2O_2 generation and accumulation from H_2O in a $KHCO_3$ aqueous electrolyte. It is speculated that the specific enhancement of selectivity for H_2O_2 generation on the $WO_3/BiVO_4/Al_2O_3$ photoanode may be caused by a blocking effect, on the mesoporous Al_2O_3 layer, that inhibits oxidative H_2O_2 degradation into O_2 on the $BiVO_4$. To investigate the blocking effect on the Al_2O_3 layer, a degradation property test of H_2O_2 was performed in a 2.0 M $KHCO_3$ aqueous solution containing H_2O_2 (550 μM) in the presence of the bare $WO_3/BiVO_4$ or $WO_3/BiVO_4/Al_2O_3$ photoanodes in presence or absence of simulated solar light irradiation in an ice bath (below 5 °C). In both cases, as shown in Fig. 5, almost all the initial amount of H_2O_2 was maintained in the dark condition, however, the H_2O_2 amount drastically decreased with irradiation by simulated solar light, suggesting that the H_2O_2 was decomposed by photocarriers (excited electrons and holes) produced on the $BiVO_4$. It should be noted that the H_2O_2 degradation in the presence of the $WO_3/BiVO_4/Al_2O_3$ photoanode was dramatically inhibited compared to the degradation in the presence of a bare $WO_3/BiVO_4$ photoanode. The oxidative H_2O_2 generation test was also confirmed in a 2.0 M $KHCO_3$ aqueous electrolyte, initially containing H_2O_2 (210 μM) on the bare $WO_3/BiVO_4$ and $WO_3/BiVO_4/Al_2O_3$ photoanodes, to track the generated H_2O_2 degradation behaviour in more detail (Fig. 6). The generated rates of H_2O_2 were reduced by the initial addition of H_2O_2 in both cases of presence or absence of Al_2O_3.

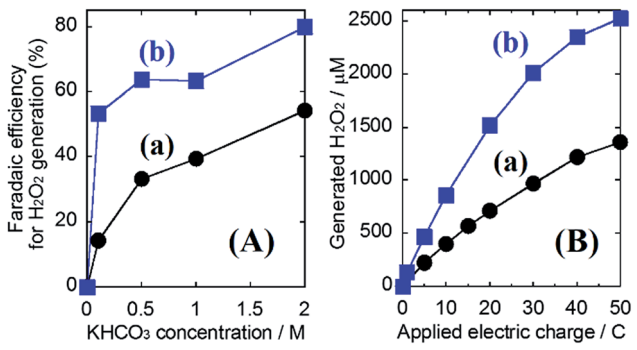

Fig. 4 (A) Oxidative H_2O_2 generation in $KHCO_3$ aqueous electrolytes (35 mL) of different concentrations at applied electric charges of 0.9C (900 s at steady photocurrent of 1 mA) under simulated solar light and (B) accumulation of oxidative H_2O_2 generation in a 2.0 M $KHCO_3$ aqueous solution (35 mL) under visible light irradiation (λ > 420 nm) using an intense Xe lamp at an applied voltage of 1.5 V in an ice bath (below 5 °C) on a (a) bare $WO_3/BiVO_4$ and (b) $WO_3/BiVO_4/Al_2O_3$ photoanodes.

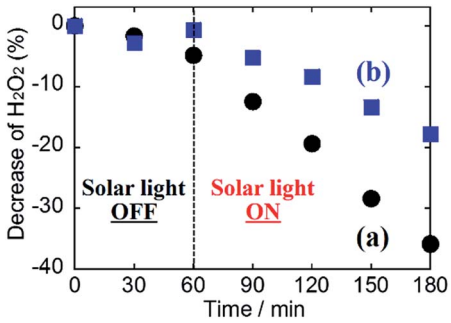

Fig. 5 Degradation properties of H_2O_2 (550 μM) initially added in a 2.0 M $KHCO_3$ aqueous solution in an ice bath (below 5 °C) under CO_2 bubbling and simulated solar light irradiation in the presence of a (a) $WO_3/BiVO_4$ and (b) $WO_3/BiVO_4/Al_2O_3$ photoanodes at no applied voltage.

However, the decreasing rate of H_2O_2 generation was significantly inhibited, from *ca.* 61% to *ca.* 39%, by introducing the Al_2O_3 layer on the $WO_3/BiVO_4$ photoanode. These results suggest that introducing the Al_2O_3 layer significantly contributed to the highly selective H_2O_2 generation and accumulation from H_2O, with a high photocurrent property, by a blocking effect that inhibited the oxidative degradation of generated H_2O_2. The mechanism of blocking effect is proposed that the H_2O_2 generated on the $BiVO_4$ in the $WO_3/BiVO_4/Al_2O_3$ photoanode diffuses in electrolyte of $KHCO_3$ aqueous solution through mesoporous of the Al_2O_3, and contact of the H_2O_2 diffused in electrolyte with the $BiVO_4$ covered uniformly and smoothly Al_2O_3 may be significantly inhibited compared with that with bare $BiVO_4$, resulting in the formation of effective inhibition of oxidative H_2O_2 degradation. Furthermore, there may be other possible mechanisms such as a blocking effect of a direct O_2 evolution site *via* a 4-photon process covering by Al_2O_3, or an enrichment effect resulting from the increasing $KHCO_3$ concentration around the photoanode based on the acid–base adsorption between HCO_3^- (a weak base) and the weakly acidic sites on the Al_2O_3 surface, related to the good

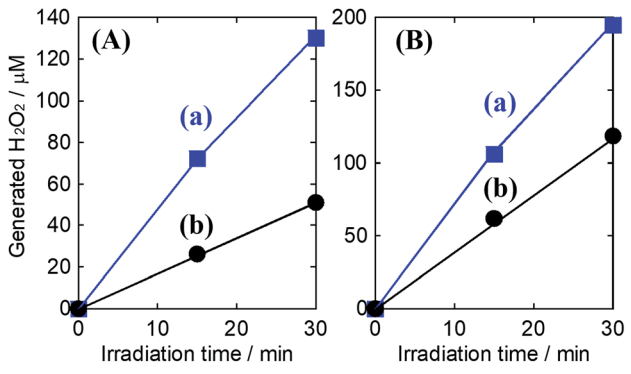

Fig. 6 Comparison of oxidative H_2O_2 generation in a 2.0 M $KHCO_3$ aqueous electrolyte (a) in the absence of or (b) containing initially-added H_2O_2 (210 μM) in an ice bath (below 5 °C) on a (A) $WO_3/BiVO_4$ and (B) $WO_3/BiVO_4/Al_2O_3$ photoanodes under simulated solar light irradiation at steady photocurrent of 1 mA.

$\eta(H_2O_2)$ in lower $KHCO_3$ concentration, as shown in Fig. 4(A). The tracking and contribution of these other mechanisms, on the Al_2O_3 layer, is currently under investigation.

Conclusions

In summary, various metal oxides were coated onto a $WO_3/BiVO_4$ photoanode to enhance the selectivity (faradaic efficiency) of oxidative H_2O_2 generation, in an aqueous electrolyte of $KHCO_3$, from water under solar light irradiation. Among the various metal oxides, the Al_2O_3 coating, which produced a mesoporous and amorphous structure on the $WO_3/BiVO_4$ photoanode, achieved excellent oxidative H_2O_2 generation at a selectivity of *ca.* 80% and an accumulation of >2500 μM (50C). Interestingly, the Al_2O_3-coated $WO_3/BiVO_4$ photoanode dramatically inhibited oxidative degradation of H_2O_2 generated on the $WO_3/BiVO_4$ photoanode after introducing the Al_2O_3 layer. This study contributes to developing a promising design for a clean H_2O_2 production system that uses only water as the raw material under solar light irradiation. More effective dreamy H_2O_2 generation, at an excellent selectivity close to 100%, can be expected by modifying the surface-treatment technology, and it is currently under investigation.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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