The hydrogen storage properties of MgH$_2$–Fe$_7$S$_8$ composites

Ying Cheng,$^*$†a Jia Bi$^b$ and Wei Zhang$^b$†

Nanostructured Fe$_7$S$_8$ was successfully synthesized and its catalytic effect on hydrogen absorption/desorption performance of MgH$_2$ is systematically discussed. The MgH$_2$ + 16.7 wt% Fe$_7$S$_8$ composite prepared by ball-milling method offers a striking catalytic activity for hydrogenation kinetics, and also reduces the initial decomposition temperature for MgH$_2$. The composite of MgH$_2$–Fe$_7$S$_8$ can absorb 4.000 wt% of hydrogen within 1800 s at 473 K, which is about twice that of pristine MgH$_2$ (1.847 wt%) under the same conditions. The onset hydrogen release temperature of Fe$_7$S$_8$-modified MgH$_2$ is 420 K, which is 290 K lower than that of additive-free MgH$_2$ (710 K). Meanwhile, the doped sample could release 4.403 wt% of hydrogen within 1800 s at 623 K as compared to 2.479 wt% of hydrogen by MgH$_2$. The activation energy for MgH$_2$–Fe$_7$S$_8$ is about 130.0 kJ mol$^{-1}$, approximately 36 kJ mol$^{-1}$ lower than that of MgH$_2$. The hydriding process of MgH$_2$ + 16.7 wt% Fe$_7$S$_8$ follows the nucleation and growth mechanism. The prominent hydrogen storage performances are related to the reactions between MgH$_2$ and Fe$_7$S$_8$. The newly formed MgS and Fe in the ball-milling process present a co-catalytic effect on the hydrogen storage performance of MgH$_2$.

1. Introduction

The global environmental issues related to the excessive emission of greenhouse gases and burning of fossil materials have driven us to center our attention on alternative energy sources that can be extensively developed and widely used.$^{1-4}$ Meanwhile, hydrogen energy is deemed as one of the most potential and ideal energy alternatives on account of its high energy density and clean and environmentally friendly nature.$^{5-8}$ However, the practical application and popularization of hydrogen is still hindered by numerous complicated technical hurdles. In recent years, solid-state storage materials have been receiving worldwide attention as ideal hydrogen storage media. Among them, magnesium hydride (MgH$_2$), which has a high hydrogen storage capacity, excellent reversibility and abundant availability, is regarded as one of the most marvelous candidates for potential hydrogen storage.$^{9-12}$ Unfortunately, the widespread practical application of MgH$_2$ is retarded by sluggish dynamic performance and high thermodynamic operating temperature.

Various attempts covering mechanical alloying,$^{13,14}$ nanostructuring,$^{15}$ and catalyst doping$^{16-20}$ have been made by numerous groups to enhance the thermodynamic and hydrogen absorption and desorption properties. Among the above-mentioned modified systems, doping MgH$_2$ with catalysts has been considered as an efficient way to boost the properties of MgH$_2$.$^{21-23}$ Especially, the transition metal iron (Fe) and its compounds have attracted considerable interest due to their pronounced catalytic effect on MgH$_2$. Yan et al.$^{15}$ observed a lower onset dehydrogenation temperature for the MgH$_2$–10 wt% FeB/CNTs composite; the modified composites could start to release hydrogen at about 196 ºC and absorb 6.2 wt% of H$_2$ at 150 ºC within 10 min. Chen et al.$^{24}$ found that doping MgH$_2$ with 5 wt% Fe nanosheets reduced the onset desorption temperature, and hydrogen could be released at 182.1 ºC and absorbed at 75 ºC by the composite. Gattia et al.$^{25}$ reported that Fe and its oxides are suitable catalysts for hydrogen storage as they drastically speed up the reaction kinetics.

In addition to iron and its compounds, sulfide compounds also showed remarkable catalytic activities for the improvement of sorption kinetics and thermodynamic properties of MgH$_2$. Jia et al.$^{26}$ discovered that MgH$_2$ with 16.7 wt% of MoS$_2$ additive showed outstanding hydrogenation/dehydrogenation properties and the hydrogenation activation energy of the modified composites was determined to be 87.19 ± 4.48 kJ mol$^{-1}$, lower than that of the pure MgH$_2$ (111.03 ± 3.41 kJ mol$^{-1}$). WS$_2$ was also found to promote the hydrogenation/dehydrogenation behavior of MgH$_2$ by Wang et al.$^{27}$ Our previous work reported that the hydrogen intake/uptake performance of MgH$_2$ was greatly influenced by nano-structured polysulfides containing iron (Fe$_2$S$_4$ and FeS$_3$).$^{28,29}$

---

$^*$ Hebei University of Environmental Engineering, Qinhuangdao, 066102, P. R. China
$^b$ Hebei Key Laboratory of Applied Chemistry, School of Environmental and Chemical Engineering, Yanshan University, Qinhuangdao 066004, P. R. China.
E-mail: zhangweihh@ysu.edu.cn; Tel: +86-335-8387744
$^†$ Both authors contributed equally to this work.
The polysulfide containing iron ion is a kind of compound in polyvalent states, which can be approximately considered by the compound of ferrous sulfide and iron sulfide. Multi-valent catalysts also showed great potential in enhancing de-hydrogenation kinetics of MgH₂ as reported by Xie and co-workers. Meanwhile, the excellent hydrogen storage behavior of MgH₂ might be related to the unstable Fe²⁺. Fe-S₈ is also a polysulfide containing iron; multi-valent and unstable Fe²⁺ exist in Fe-S₈, which might contribute to the enhancement of the hydrogen storage capacity of MgH₂.

Given the encouraging results mentioned above, in this work, Fe-S₈ was successfully synthesized and its catalytic effectiveness toward hydrogen adsorption/desorption of MgH₂ was systemically investigated. Besides, the corresponding catalytic mechanism of Fe-S₈ to the enhancement of hydrogen properties of the pristine MgH₂ was also presented based on the information reflected by hydrogen absorption/desorption kinetics, phase compositions and microstructure observations.

2. Experimental

2.1 Synthesis of Fe-S₈

1 mmol FeSO₄·7H₂O and 2 mmol thiourea were added to a solvent composed of triethylentetramine and deionized water (the ratio of the components of the solvent was 1:2) and stirred for 1 h by magnetic stirring until the solution was homogenized. The solution was then transferred into a Teflon autoclave and maintained at 140 °C for 24 h. After cooling down to room temperature naturally, the precipitate was gathered by centrifugation and washed with distilled water and absolute alcohol several times. The obtained precipitate was dried in a vacuum oven at 80 °C for 6 h. The precursor [Fe₁₈S₂₅](TETA)₁₄ was finally prepared.

0.1 g precursor [Fe₁₈S₂₅](TETA)₁₄ and 15 ml oleylamine were added into a boiling flask and promptly heated to 90 °C in a vacuum atmosphere. To protect the sample from oxidation, argon was introduced into the boiling flask as a protective gas. To protect the sample from oxidation, extra 40 ml alcohol was introduced into the boiling flask and the temperature of the boiling flask decreased to room temperature, extra 40 ml alcohol was introduced into the flask under mechanical stirring for about 10 min and the solution was further aged for 2 h. Fe-S₈ was successfully synthesized and could be separated after the aged solution was centrifuged and washed with absolute alcohol.

2.2 Synthesis of MgH₂–Fe-S₈ composites

MgH₂ was synthesized by the method of hydrogen combustion from commercial magnesium powder. Magnesium was hydrogenated at 400 °C with a hydrogen pressure of 4 MPa for 10 h. The obtained powder was then ball-milled at 350 rpm for 2 h. The target MgH₂ was successfully prepared after hydrogenating the sample one more time at 400 °C under 4 MPa hydrogen pressure for 10 h.

MgH₂–Fe-S₈ composite was synthesized through the ball-milling method by mechanical milling of MgH₂ and Fe-S₈ with a weight ratio of 5:1. To reduce the increasing temperature, the milling process was launched at a speed of 350 rpm and ball-milled in one direction for 0.5 h and paused for about 0.25 h, unceasingly starting in another direction for 0.5 h. The ball-to-sample weight ratio was 20:1. To prevent the sample from oxygen and vapor, all samples were handled in an air-filled glove box.

2.3 Characterization

X-ray diffraction (XRD) was performed on a SmartLab high-resolution X-ray diffractometer (made by Rigaku Company) with Cu Kα radiation at 40 kV, 40 mA. The scanning speed was 4° min⁻¹ in the range of 10° to 80°. Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) was employed to observe the microstructure and morphology of the formed sample. The hydrogen absorption/desorption behavior in relation to temperature for the composite of MgH₂–Fe-S₈ and non-additive MgH₂ was determined in a pressure–composition–temperature (PCT) apparatus. The sample was gradually heated from room temperature to the set temperature, which was kept constant during the whole experiment. Temperature-programmed-desorption (TPD) was used to investigate the initial desorption temperature for the composite of MgH₂–Fe₈S₈ and MgH₂ free-additive. All the tested composites were heated from room temperature to 770 K at a heating rate of 10 K min⁻¹. Differential scanning calorimetry (DSC) was performed from 200 K to 770 K at various heating rates: 5 K min⁻¹, 10 K min⁻¹, 15 K min⁻¹, and 20 K min⁻¹.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Characteristics of the prepared nano-structured Fe-S₈

XRD pattern of the as-synthesized Fe-S₈ in Fig. 1a exhibits dominant diffraction peaks at 2θ = 29.9°, 33.8°, 43.9°, 53.1°, 57.3°, 64.8°, and 71.2° matching well with the Fe-S₈ phase, in accordance with the data reported in JCPDS PDF 33-0664. As can be seen from Fig. 1b, the prepared sample presents the morphology of two-dimensional hexagonal sheets with a thickness of approximately 20 nm and a diameter of around 250 nm. Based on XRD and SEM results, nano-structured Fe-S₈ was successfully fabricated.

3.2 Catalytic effectiveness of the fabricated Fe-S₈ for the dehydrogenation/hydrogenation kinetics of MgH₂

The catalytic role of the as-synthesized Fe-S₈ in the dehydrogenation/hydrogenation kinetics of MgH₂ was studied by using TPD isothermal dehydrogenation/hydrogenation measurements. The TPD curves of MgH₂ and MgH₂ + 16.7 wt% Fe-S₈ composite at a heating rate of 10 K min⁻¹ are shown in Fig. 2. As observed, the Fe-S₈ doped MgH₂ sample shows a striking effect of reducing the onset desorption temperature of MgH₂. The prepared MgH₂ commences to release hydrogen at approximately 710 K, whereas the onset desorption temperature for Fe₈S₈-modified MgH₂ presents a remarkable decrease to 420 K, which is 290 K lower than that of additive-free MgH₂. As for the pristine MgH₂, the full desorption capacity is about 4.45 wt%. After introducing nano-Fe-S₈ into MgH₂, the desorbed content is increased and the maximum yield for the desorption process
is nearly 5.72 wt%. Based on TPD measurements, the lower initial desorption temperature and the maximum desorption yield reveal that the introduced nano-Fe$_7$S$_8$ into MgH$_2$ could successfully boost the desorption properties of MgH$_2$.

Isothermal dehydrogenation experiments were conducted at 623 K to further compare the effect of the doped Fe$_7$S$_8$ on the desorption kinetics process in MgH$_2$; the relative curves for MgH$_2$ with and without additives in the desorption process are presented in Fig. 3. It is evident that with the increase in temperature, the hydrogen desorption properties of MgH$_2$ and MgH$_2$ + 16.7 wt% Fe$_7$S$_8$ are enhanced. MgH$_2$ + 16.7 wt% Fe$_7$S$_8$ composite exhibits much faster kinetics than that of pristine MgH$_2$. The MgH$_2$ + 16.7 wt% Fe$_7$S$_8$ sample could release 1.515 wt% H$_2$ in 1800 s at 573 K. In contrast, the pure MgH$_2$ only liberated 0.250 wt% H$_2$ in the same time period. When the temperature increases to 623 K, the additive-free MgH$_2$, which could only desorb 2.479 wt% of hydrogen in 1800 s at 623 K, shows worse desorption properties than the doped sample. MgH$_2$ + 16.7 wt% Fe$_7$S$_8$ composite could liberate 4.403 wt% of hydrogen within 1800 s under identical conditions. As compared to non-additive MgH$_2$, the dopant Fe$_7$S$_8$ promotes the dehydrogenation kinetics.

The Kissinger’s method$^{31}$ was performed to further understand the enhanced dehydrogenation process for MgH$_2$ and MgH$_2$–Fe$_7$S$_8$ composites; the apparent activation energy ($E_a$) of those two composites were estimated by the Arrhenius equation described as below:

$$\frac{d \ln (z/T_m^2)}{d(1/T_m)} = \frac{-E_a}{R}$$

where $z$ is the heating rate (K min$^{-1}$), $T_m$ is the peak temperature for the maximum desorption rate (K), and $R$ is the gas constant of 8.314 J (mol$^{-1}$ K$^{-1}$). Fig. 4a and b display DSC curves of MgH$_2$ and MgH$_2$–Fe$_7$S$_8$ composites, respectively, at various heating rates. From the slope of the fitted line in Fig. 4c, the slope for the two samples were obtained as $-19.95$ and $-15.64$, while the corresponding apparent activation energy $E_a$ for MgH$_2$ was approximately 165.9 kJ mol$^{-1}$. It can be noticed that the apparent activation energy $E_a$ of MgH$_2$–Fe$_7$S$_8$ was decreased to 130.0 kJ mol$^{-1}$, which is lower by about 36 kJ mol$^{-1}$ than that of MgH$_2$. The reduced apparent activation energy demonstrated above gives
the indication that the dopant Fe\textsubscript{7}S\textsubscript{8} contributes to decreasing the energy barrier during the desorption process of MgH\textsubscript{2}, which is directly responsible for the superior improvement of the dehydrogenation properties. In a recent literature\textsuperscript{25}, activation energies for milled MgH\textsubscript{2} + 5 wt\% Fe\textsubscript{7}S\textsubscript{8}, MgH\textsubscript{2} + 5 wt\% Fe\textsubscript{2}O\textsubscript{3} and MgH\textsubscript{2} + 5 wt\% Fe\textsubscript{3}O\textsubscript{4} calculated using the Kissinger plot were 220.69 kJ mol\textsuperscript{-1}, 231.90 kJ mol\textsuperscript{-1} and 304.45 kJ mol\textsuperscript{-1}, respectively, which indicates that the addition of Fe\textsubscript{7}S\textsubscript{8} may show superior catalytic effect compared to that of some other additives.

In addition to the hydrogen desorption behavior, the modified impact of Fe\textsubscript{7}S\textsubscript{8} on the hydrogen uptake performance on MgH_{2} was also investigated by reabsorbing the dehydrogenated MgH\textsubscript{2} and MgH\textsubscript{2}–Fe\textsubscript{7}S\textsubscript{8} composites under 3 MPa of H\textsubscript{2}. Fig. 5 presents the hydrogenation curves of MgH\textsubscript{2} and MgH\textsubscript{2}–Fe\textsubscript{7}S\textsubscript{8} composite at 473 K and 523 K, respectively. It can be clearly seen that the dehydrogenated MgH\textsubscript{2} sample only absorbs 1.847 wt\% of hydrogen within 1800 s at 473 K, whereas the dehydrogenated MgH\textsubscript{2} catalyzed by Fe\textsubscript{7}S\textsubscript{8} composite shows higher hydrogen absorption ability under the same conditions, with an absorption capacity of 4.004 wt\%. When the temperature sharply increases to 523 K, the hydrogen absorption ability of both dehydrogenated MgH\textsubscript{2}–Fe\textsubscript{7}S\textsubscript{8} composite and additive-free MgH\textsubscript{2} presents an obvious rise. The amount of hydrogen uptake increases to 3.915 wt\% for pristine MgH\textsubscript{2} within 1800 s, while that of the Fe\textsubscript{7}S\textsubscript{8} doped composite reaches 4.804 wt\%.

The hydrogenation mechanism can usually be explained by comparing the hydrogen absorption rate curves with the rate equations for MgH\textsubscript{2} + 16.7 wt\% Fe\textsubscript{7}S\textsubscript{8} and MgH\textsubscript{2} composites. The Avrami–Erofeev equation, eqn (2), is usually employed to fit the hydrogenation absorption process, which gives a strong idea for the nucleation and growth processes.

\[
\alpha = 1 - \exp(-kt^m)
\]

where \(\alpha\) is the reacted fraction, \(k\) is the rate constant, and \(m\) is the order of the reaction. Fig. 6 shows the fitted hydrogenation kinetic curves of MgH\textsubscript{2} and MgH\textsubscript{2} + 16.7 wt\% Fe\textsubscript{7}S\textsubscript{8} composites at 523 K. It is obvious that there is a great difference between the fitted curve and the normalized curve for MgH\textsubscript{2} without additives. However, this similar phenomenon does not appear in the composite of MgH\textsubscript{2}–Fe\textsubscript{7}S\textsubscript{8}, which is consistent with the experimental data. The fitted curves in Fig. 6 demonstrate that the reaction mechanism of MgH\textsubscript{2}–Fe\textsubscript{7}S\textsubscript{8} composite conforms to nucleation and growth processes. Besides, \(m\) represents the
order of reaction; the rate-controlling steps for the hydrogen uptake process are connected with the value of \( m \). It has been reported that the values of \( m \) for the one-dimensional diffusion process and the three-dimensional interfacial reaction are assigned as 0.620 and 1.070, respectively.32 As for MgH$_2$ without the catalyst, \( m \) is 0.9265 at 523 K, which is pretty close to 1.070. For the doped MgH$_2$–Fe$_7$S$_8$ composite, the value of \( m \) was 0.4212, which approaches 0.620. Therefore, the rate-controlling steps of MgH$_2$ during the hydrogenation process changes from the three-dimensional interfacial reaction to the one-dimensional diffusion process, which is relevant to the addition of Fe$_7$S$_8$.

3.3 Structural characterization and catalytic effect mechanism of MgH$_2$–Fe$_7$S$_8$ composite

Fig. 7 presents SEM images of MgH$_2$ and MgH$_2$–Fe$_7$S$_8$ composite after the re-hydrogenation process. It is obvious that the particle size of pristine MgH$_2$ is much bigger than that of MgH$_2$–Fe$_7$S$_8$ composite; some of the particles in pristine MgH$_2$ are agglomerated and inhomogeneous. The particles in the Fe$_7$S$_8$ added MgH$_2$ have a loose structure and are highly dispersed, while the particles of additive-free MgH$_2$ aggregate into large clusters and become tough. Xie et al.33 and Varin et al.34 reported that the decreased particle size and loose structure could boost the rates of dehydrogenation-hydrogenation, which indicates that the added Fe$_7$S$_8$ can not only help to decrease the particle size but also serve as an inhibitor to limit the formation of large clusters and result in favourable hydrogen kinetics.

To further elaborate on the catalytic mechanism related to the striking hydrogen absorption/desorption kinetics and thermodynamic properties of MgH$_2$–Fe$_7$S$_8$ composite, XRD analysis was employed to characterize the phase structure of the doped composite at different stages. Fig. 8 shows the XRD patterns of MgH$_2$–Fe$_7$S$_8$ composites that were collected at the ball-milling and de/hydrogenation stages. In the XRD pattern of the composite at the ball-milling stage, the main diffraction peak assigned to MgH$_2$ appears accompanied by some new phases of Mg$_2$FeH$_6$, MgS, and Fe. In the XRD pattern of the composite at the hydrogenation stage, all the diffraction peaks are very intense due to hydrogenation. After the re-hydrogenation procedure, the major diffraction peaks assigned to Fe, Mg$_2$FeH$_6$ and MgS are still present. The appearance of new phases of Mg$_2$FeH$_6$, MgS and Fe indicates the reaction of MgH$_2$ and Fe$_7$S$_8$ during the ball-milling/re-hydrogenation stage. The reactions can be summarized as follows:

\[
8 \text{MgH}_2 + \text{Fe}_7\text{S}_8 \rightarrow 7\text{Fe} + \text{MgS} + 8\text{H}_2 \tag{1}
\]
\[
\text{Fe} + 2\text{MgH}_2 + \text{H}_2 \rightarrow \text{Mg}_2\text{FeH}_6 \tag{2}
\]

To confirm the possibility of the reaction between MgH$_2$ and Fe$_7$S$_8$, the total change \( \Delta G^\circ \) was calculated. The standard \( \Delta H_m^\circ \) for MgH$_2$, Fe$_7$S$_8$, and MgS is $-75.3$, $-824.2$, and $-346$ kJ mol$^{-1}$, and \( \Delta S_m^\circ \) are $-35.9$, $-742.2$, and $-341.8$ kJ mol$^{-1}$, respectively. The total change \( \Delta G^\circ \) for reaction (1) is $-1705.0$ kJ mol$^{-1}$, whereas \( \Delta G^\circ \) for MgH$_2$ is $-35.9$ kJ mol$^{-1}$; this confirms the possibility of occurrence of reaction (1) from the thermodynamic potentials, and the dopant Fe$_7$S$_8$ is conducive to the hydrogen absorption/desorption process.

In the XRD pattern of the composite at the dehydrogenation stage, the dominant diffraction peak belongs to Mg, implying that Mg$_2$FeH$_6$ and MgH$_2$ produced in the hydrogenation process

---

**Fig. 6** Fitted hydrogenation kinetic curves of MgH$_2$ and MgH$_2$ + 16.7 wt% Fe$_7$S$_8$ composites at 523 K under the pressure of 3 MPa.

**Fig. 7** SEM images of (a) MgH$_2$, (b) MgH$_2$–Fe$_7$S$_8$ composite after the re-hydrogenation process.

**Fig. 8** XRD patterns of MgH$_2$–Fe$_7$S$_8$ composites at the (a) ball-milling (b) hydrogenation (c) dehydrogenation stages.
Mg$_2$FeH$_6$ can uptake and liberate hydrogen. Therefore, than 5.0 wt% H$_2$ within 50 min at 280°C.\cite{2021} The enhancement of the dehydriding properties of LiBH$_4$ was also confirmed by Li et al.\cite{2018} reported that the Mg$_2$FeH$_6$@MgH$_2$ core–shell sample exhibited faster hydrogen desorption kinetics, releasing more than 15.0 wt% H$_2$ at 623 K as compared to 1.4 wt% of hydrogen by MgH$_2$. The onset desorption temperature for Fe$_7$S$_8$-modified MgH$_2$ is 420 K, lower than that of additive-free MgH$_2$ (710 K). The hydriding process of MgH$_2$ + 16.7 wt% Fe$_7$S$_8$ follows the nucleation and growth mechanism. The activation energy $E_a$ of MgH$_2$–Fe$_7$S$_8$ is about 130.0 kJ mol$^{-1}$, approximately 36 kJ mol$^{-1}$ lower than that of MgH$_2$. The striking catalytic effect of Fe$_7$S$_8$ on the hydrogen storage performance of MgH$_2$ is related to the reactions between MgH$_2$ and Fe$_7$S$_8$. The newly formed MgS and Fe during the ball-milling process present a co-catalytic effect on the hydrogen storage performance of MgH$_2$.

### Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

### Acknowledgements

This work was financially supported by the Natural Science Foundation of Hebei Province of China (No. E2019431036); Science and Technology Project of Hebei Education Department (BJ2020043); Science and Technology Support Plan of Qinhuangdao Science and Technology Bureau (201805A010); Doctoral Foundation of Hebei University of Environmental Engineering (201805).

### Notes and references


