


 Cite this: *Nanoscale*, 2024, **16**, 6278

## An enhanced electrocatalytic oxygen evolution reaction by the photothermal effect and its induced micro-electric field†

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Promoting better thermodynamics and kinetics of electrocatalysts is key to achieving an efficient electrocatalytic oxygen evolution reaction (OER). Utilizing the photothermal effect and micro-electric field of electrocatalysts is a promising approach to promote the sluggish OER. Herein, to reveal the relationship of the photothermal effect and its induced micro-electric field with OER performance, NiS<sub>x</sub> coupled NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub> on nickel foam (NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF) is synthesized and subjected to the OER under near-infrared (NIR) light. Owing to the photothermal effect and its induced micro-electric field, the OER performance of NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF is significantly enhanced. Compared with no NIR light irradiation, the overpotential at 50 mA cm<sup>-2</sup> and the Tafel slope of NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF under NIR light irradiation were 234.1 mV and 38.0 mV dec<sup>-1</sup>, which were lower by 12.4 mV and 7.1 mV dec<sup>-1</sup>, and it exhibited stable operation at 1.6 V vs. RHE for 8 h with 99% activity maintained. This work presents a novel inspiration to understand the photothermal effect-enhanced electrocatalytic OER.

 Received 12th January 2024,  
 Accepted 20th February 2024

DOI: 10.1039/d4nr00170b

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### 1. Introduction

Hydrogen energy is one of the clean and non-polluting energies with huge potential to replace traditional fossil energy.<sup>1–5</sup> Alkaline water electrolysis is an economical method for clean hydrogen generation.<sup>6–9</sup> However, hydrogen production by alkaline water electrolysis is generally limited by the inherent thermodynamics and sluggish kinetics resulting from the slow four-electron water oxidation process at the anode (4OH<sup>-</sup> → 2H<sub>2</sub>O + O<sub>2</sub> + 4e<sup>-</sup>).<sup>10–12</sup> To achieve an efficient OER, many materials are being utilized as electrocatalysts, such as noble metal-based OER electrocatalysts<sup>13,14</sup> (e.g., RuO<sub>2</sub> and IrO<sub>2</sub>) and transition metal-based OER electrocatalysts<sup>15–20</sup> (e.g., oxides, hydroxide, carbides, phosphides, sulfides, nitrides and poly-

mers). Among them, Ni–Fe-based hydroxide catalysts have exhibited excellent OER activity in alkaline electrolytes due to the bimetallic synergistic effect of Ni and Fe as well as the optimized electronic structures resulting from the rearrangement of the metal atoms.<sup>21–23</sup> However, the OER performance of Ni–Fe-based hydroxide is strongly limited by the active sites at the edges and weak conductivity.<sup>24,25</sup> In addition, a proper ratio of Ni<sup>2+</sup>/Ni<sup>3+</sup> is crucial for improving the OER properties of Ni–Fe based hydroxide electrocatalysts.<sup>26</sup>

As a classical nonhomogeneous reaction, the electrocatalytic OER is known to contain both thermodynamic and kinetic processes.<sup>27,28</sup> In recent years, amorphous electrocatalysts for the electrocatalytic OER have been widely reported to optimize the adsorption and activation of H<sub>2</sub>O and OH<sup>-</sup>, the formation of intermediates (O\*, OH\*, and OOH\*) and generation and desorption of O<sub>2</sub>, which provided a new strategy to enhance the OER activity of Ni–Fe hydroxide.<sup>29–32</sup> Furthermore, a previous report has shown that the flat band voltage of Ni–Fe hydroxide is around 0.06 V vs. RHE.<sup>33</sup> Thus, according to the heterojunction theory, coupling of materials with different flat-band potentials with Ni–Fe hydroxide can optimize its intrinsic electronic structure and lead to rebalancing of the Fermi level.<sup>34</sup> In our previous report, Ni–sulfide (NiS<sub>x</sub>) coupled with Co<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub> can format a more advantageous electronic structure, and the flat-band potential of nickel sulfides has been reported to be around -0.64 V vs. RHE.<sup>35,36</sup> Therefore, it can be assumed that NiS<sub>x</sub>/NiFe hydroxide would

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† Electronic supplementary information (ESI) available. See DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1039/d4nr00170b>

facilitate the formation of more suitable  $\text{Ni}^{2+}/\text{Ni}^{3+}$  ratios, thus driving an efficient OER.

In addition to modifying the electronic structure of electrocatalysts, achieving enhanced strategies for electrocatalysis using the temperature field generated by the photothermal effect has become an interesting topic in recent years.<sup>37–41</sup> From the Arrhenius law ( $k = A \exp(-\frac{E_a}{RT})$ ), the catalytic reaction temperature ( $T$ ) could be known to have a vital influence on the reaction rate ( $k$ ).<sup>42</sup> Electrodes with photo-thermal conversion capability are able to directly utilize energy from renewable solar energy and be heated, which provides a novel strategy to achieve an efficient and economical electrocatalytic reaction. Furthermore, previous experiments as well as simulation studies proved that the construction of semiconductor heterostructures induces the equilibrium of Fermi energy levels, which accelerates electron transfer and creates a micro-electric field induced by photothermal effects.<sup>39,43</sup> The micro-electric field can effectively change the adsorption and desorption of reactive substances on the electrocatalyst surface, thus effectively improving the reaction kinetics. Notably, the photothermal response of  $\text{NiS}_x$  in the near-infrared region has been extensively proved.<sup>44,45</sup> Thus, these advantages indicated that  $\text{NiS}_x/\text{NiFe}$  hydroxide heterostructures can effectively drive a photothermal OER.

Herein, in order to unravel the influence of the photothermal effect and its induced micro-electric field on the thermodynamics and kinetics of the OER, amorphous  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  was prepared for a highly efficient OER under NIR light irradiation. Due to the photothermal effect and the induced micro-electric field, the OER performance of  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  was significantly enhanced. Notably, compared with no NIR light irradiation, the overpotential at 50  $\text{mA cm}^{-2}$  and the Tafel slope of  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  under NIR light irradiation were 234.1 mV and 38.0  $\text{mV dec}^{-1}$ , which were lower by 12.4 mV and 7.1  $\text{mV dec}^{-1}$ , respectively. Furthermore,  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  under NIR irradiation was able to run stably at 1.6 V vs. RHE for 8 h with 99% activity maintained. This work provides novel understanding with beneficial reference towards the enhancement of the water oxidation reaction by the photothermal effect.

## 2. Experimental section

### 2.1 Materials preparation

**2.1.1 Fabrication of  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  and  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{FTO}$ .**  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y$  was grown on nickel foam (NF) using an electrodeposition process. To begin with, a NF ( $1.0 \times 2.0 \text{ cm}$ ) substrate was immersed in 1.0 M hydrochloric acid for 30 min, and then washed several times sequentially with deionised water and ethanol. The electrodeposition process of  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y$  on NF was conducted on a three-electrode system using a CHI 760E workstation. The pre-treated NF was employed directly as the working electrode. An Ag/AgCl electrode and a graphite rod (99%) electrode were used as the reference and counter electrodes, respectively. The composition of the electrolyte was an

aqueous solution containing 0.05 M  $\text{Ni}(\text{NO}_3)_2 \cdot 6\text{H}_2\text{O}$  and 0.05 M  $\text{Fe}(\text{NO}_3)_3 \cdot 9\text{H}_2\text{O}$ . The electrodeposition of  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  was performed at a potential of  $-1.0 \text{ V vs. Ag/AgCl}$  for 100 s. After the electrodeposition, the as-prepared  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  was cleaned several times with deionized water and dried at 60 °C for 6 h in a vacuum oven. For comparison,  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y$  was synthesized with the same electrodeposition method using fluorine-doped tin oxide glass (FTO) as the working electrode. The  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y$  sample was obtained on NF and FTO with a loading of 1.0  $\text{mg cm}^{-2}$ .

**2.1.2 Fabrication of  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  and  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{FTO}$ .** The  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  electrode was synthesized on the as-prepared  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  electrode by the electrodeposition method. The electrodeposition process of  $\text{NiS}_x$  on  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  was conducted on a three-electrode system using a CHI 760E workstation. The prepared  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  was directly used as the working electrode. An Ag/AgCl electrode and a graphite rod (99%) electrode were used as the reference and counter electrodes, respectively. The composition of the electrolyte was an aqueous solution containing 0.025 M  $\text{Ni}(\text{NO}_3)_2 \cdot 6\text{H}_2\text{O}$  and 0.75 M thiourea. The electrodeposition of  $\text{NiS}_x$  on  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  was conducted by cyclic voltammetry (CV) in a potential window of  $-1.2$  to  $0.2 \text{ V vs. Ag/AgCl}$ . CV was performed at a scan rate of 10  $\text{mV s}^{-1}$  for two cycles. After electrodeposition, the as-prepared  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  was washed with deionized water and dried at 60 °C for 6 h in a vacuum oven. For comparison,  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y$  was synthesized with the above electrodeposition method using  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{FTO}$  as the working electrode. The  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y$  sample was obtained on NF and FTO with a loading of 1.3  $\text{mg cm}^{-2}$ . In addition,  $\text{NiS}_x/\text{NF}$  was prepared using an electrodeposition method under the same conditions, where  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{FTO}$  was replaced with NF as the working electrode.  $\text{NiS}_x$  was obtained on NF loaded at 0.3  $\text{mg cm}^{-2}$ .

### 2.2 Characterization studies

An X-ray diffractometer was used (XRD, PANalytical X'pert PRO) to examine the crystal structures of samples. The morphologies and elemental micrographs of samples were analyzed using a scanning electron microscope (SEM, Zeiss SUPRA 55VP) equipped with an energy-dispersive X-ray (EDS) analyzer. Transmission electron microscopy (TEM, FEI Talos F200X) recorded the microstructures of samples. X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) of the samples was carried out using a Thermo Scientific K-Alpha spectrometer. The water contact angle of samples was tested and documented using a Kruss K100 surface tension meter.

### 2.3 Electrochemical measurements

All the electrochemical properties were determined using a standard three-electrode quartz cell using a CHI 760E workstation. The fabricated electrodes were used as the working electrode. A graphite rod and a standard Hg/HgO electrode were applied as the counter electrode and reference electrode, respectively. The composition of the electrolyte was an aqueous solution containing 1.0 M KOH. Before electro-

chemical measurements, 5 cycles of CV activation of working electrodes at a scan rate of  $2 \text{ mV s}^{-1}$  within a potential window of 1.0 V to 1.8 V vs. RHE were performed. Linear sweep voltammetry (LSV) was performed at a scanning rate of  $2 \text{ mV s}^{-1}$ . The tested potentials were transformed into the potentials vs. RHE using the Nernst equation for manual *iR*-compensation:

$$E_{\text{RHE}} = E_{\text{Hg}/\text{HgO}} + E_{\text{Hg}/\text{HgO}}^{\ominus} + 0.059 \text{ pH} - IR_s, \quad (1)$$

where  $E_{\text{Hg}/\text{HgO}}^{\ominus} = 0.098 \text{ V}$  at room temperature ( $25 \pm 0.5 \text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$ ), pH is the pH value of 1.0 M KOH electrolyte (pH = 13.71),  $I$  is the current density ( $J$ ), and  $R_s$  is the solution resistance. Electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) was performed in a frequency scale between 0.1 and  $10^5 \text{ Hz}$  with an AC voltage amplitude of 5 mV. Equivalent circuits were fitted for the recorded EIS data using ZView software. The electrochemically active surface area (ECSA) of all samples was obtained based on the CV test performed using the double layer capacitance method ( $C_{\text{dl}}$ ). The CV curves of samples were tested in the non-faradaic potential area with scanning rates of 10, 20, 30, 40, and  $50 \text{ mV s}^{-1}$ . Subsequently, a linear relationship of the anodic-cathodic current density ( $\Delta J$ ) and the scan rate ( $\nu$ ) was fitted. The  $C_{\text{dl}}$  value was calculated using half the slope value obtained from the  $\Delta J$  vs. scan rate curve. All the ECSA values were derived from the  $C_{\text{dl}}$  value and the following formula:<sup>46</sup>

$$\text{ECSA} = C_{\text{dl}}/C_s, \quad (2)$$

where  $C_s$  is the capacitance of NF.

The oxygen generation rate of  $\text{NiS}_x@\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  was calculated from the Faraday law and the precondition that the electrode current efficiency is 100%:<sup>47,48</sup>

$$Q = nZF, \quad (3)$$

$$N_{\text{O}_2} = n \times 1000/t, \quad (4)$$

where  $Q$  is the overall charge on the electrode that was measured on an electrochemical workstation,  $n$  is the mass of oxygen,  $Z$  is the number of electrons transferred ( $Z = 4$ ),  $F$  is the Faraday constant ( $96485 \text{ C mol}^{-1}$ ),  $N_{\text{O}_2}$  is the rate of oxygen formation ( $\text{mmol h}^{-1}$ ), and  $t$  is the time of the reaction (h).

The turnover frequency (TOF) is calculated according to the following formula:

$$\text{TOF} = \frac{J \times A}{Z \times F \times n} \quad (5)$$

where  $J$  is the value of the catalytic current,  $A$  is the geometric area of the electrode ( $1 \text{ cm}^2$ ),  $Z$  is the electron transfer number,  $F$  is the Faraday constant ( $96485 \text{ C mol}^{-1}$ ), and  $n$  is the number of catalytically active sites ( $\text{mol cm}^{-2}$ ).

## 2.4 Photothermal measurements

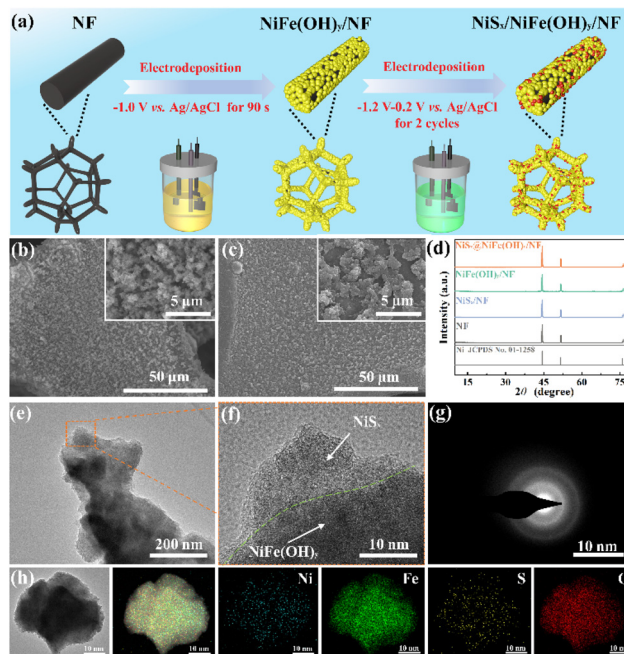
Near infrared transformation characteristics of the electrodes in the electrolyte were evaluated using NIR light (wavelength: 808 nm, optical watt density:  $2 \text{ W cm}^{-2}$ ). A water recirculation device was used to avoid the increase in electrolyte temperature under prolonged testing (Fig. S11†). Thermal imaging pic-

tures were recorded using an IR camera (C5, FLIR Systems, Inc., USA), and the temperature of the electrode surfaces illuminated by NIR was examined.

## 3. Results and discussion

### 3.1 Characterization of $\text{NiS}_x@\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$

Fig. 1a illustrates the preparation of  $\text{NiS}_x@\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  by a two-step electrodeposition method, and the image of the resulting samples is shown in Fig. S1.† Fig. 1b exhibits the SEM image of  $\text{NiS}_x@\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$ . The corresponding EDS mapping of  $\text{NiS}_x@\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  is shown in Fig. S2,† which demonstrates the existence of the Ni, Fe, S and O elements. Compared to the SEM image of single  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  and  $\text{NiS}_x/\text{NF}$  (Fig. 1c and Fig. S3†),  $\text{NiS}_x@\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  has a distinct flocculent presence on the surface of  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$ . Fig. 1d shows the XRD patterns of  $\text{NiS}_x@\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$ ,  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$ ,  $\text{NiS}_x/\text{NF}$  and bare NF. Notably, only the diffraction peaks ( $44.5^\circ$ ,  $51.6^\circ$  and  $76.1^\circ$ ) of NF were observed in all samples. In order to exclude the effect of the substrate, the XRD of  $\text{NiS}_x@\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  deposited on the FTO substrate was tested. Similarly, no diffraction peaks other than those of the substrate were seen (Fig. S4†), suggesting that  $\text{NiS}_x$  and  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  have weak crystallinity. To further detect the microstructure and morphological details,  $\text{NiS}_x@\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  was selected for TEM and high-resolution TEM (HRTEM) character-



**Fig. 1** (a) Schematic diagram of the synthesis route for  $\text{NiS}_x@\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$ . SEM images of (b)  $\text{NiS}_x@\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  and (c)  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$ . (d) XRD patterns of  $\text{NiS}_x@\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$ ,  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$ ,  $\text{NiS}_x/\text{NF}$  and NF. (e) TEM image, (f) high-resolution TEM image, and (g) SAED pattern of  $\text{NiS}_x@\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y$  in  $\text{NiS}_x@\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$ . (h) HAADF-TEM image and the corresponding STEM-EDS elemental mapping images of  $\text{NiS}_x@\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y$  in  $\text{NiS}_x@\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$ .

ization. Fig. 1e shows the TEM image of  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y$  in the  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  sample. The HRTEM image of  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y$  is shown in Fig. 1f, which clearly exhibits weak crystallinity with no typical lattices of  $\text{NiS}_x$  and  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y$ . Correspondingly, the absence of distinct crystalline surfaces was observed from the selected area electron diffraction (SAED) pattern (Fig. 1g).

In addition, Fig. 1h shows the STEM-EDS elemental mapping of  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y$ , which indicates an even distribution of Ni, Fe, O and S elements, suggesting that  $\text{NiS}_x$  is uniformly deposited on the surface of  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$ . Furthermore, NF is hydrophobic with a contact angle of  $109.8^\circ$ , while the prepared  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  surface is superhydrophilic, which enhances the affinity and osmotic hydrophilicity of the electrolyte and thus facilitates the OER process of  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  (Fig. S5<sup>†</sup>). From the above investigation, it was seen that  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  is an amorphous heterostructure. As discussed later, this structure has a more suitable electronic structure, which is one of the reasons for its enhanced OER activity.

### 3.2 OER activity and kinetics of $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$

Fig. 2a shows the LSV curves of NF,  $\text{NiS}_x/\text{NF}$ ,  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$ , and  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$ . Compared with bare NF,  $\text{NiS}_x/\text{NF}$  and  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$ ,  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  has a higher OER current density with an overpotential of 246.5 mV at 50 mA

$\text{cm}^{-2}$ , which was superior to those of  $\text{NiS}_x/\text{NF}$  (330.4 mV) and  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  (264.1 mV) (Fig. 2b). In addition,  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  exhibited a Tafel slope of  $45.1 \text{ mV dec}^{-1}$ , which was lower than those of  $\text{NiS}_x/\text{NF}$  ( $86.1 \text{ mV dec}^{-1}$ ) and  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  ( $50.3 \text{ mV dec}^{-1}$ ), suggesting the enhanced reaction kinetics of  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  (Fig. 2c). Notably, these Tafel slope results demonstrated that  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  has excellent catalytic kinetics for the OER, which is competitive compared to the reported Ni–Fe-based catalysts in recent years (Table S1<sup>†</sup>). To gain insight into the intrinsic catalytic activity of  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$ , the EIS of samples was measured. Fig. 2d shows the EIS results of the samples at 1.6 V vs. RHE. Among all samples, the charge transfer resistance of the  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  catalyst is  $0.5 \Omega$ , which is smaller than that of  $\text{NiS}_x/\text{NF}$  ( $1.15 \Omega$ ) and  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  ( $0.61 \Omega$ ), suggesting that it possesses the best OER charge transfer capability and reaction kinetics, corresponding to the Tafel slope results. To avoid disturbances in electrochemical activity by NF substrates,  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y$  and  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y$  were prepared on FTO to further evaluate their activity and kinetics ( $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{FTO}$  and  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{FTO}$ , Fig. S6<sup>†</sup>). As shown in Fig. S7<sup>†</sup>, the LSV and EIS results also show that  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{FTO}$  exhibits higher OER activity and kinetics than  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{FTO}$ , respectively. In order to evaluate the OER long-term stability, the  $J$ - $T$  curves of  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$ ,  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  and  $\text{NiS}_x/\text{NF}$  were tested at 1.6 V vs. RHE for 24 h. As shown in Fig. 2e,  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  maintains 93% OER activity after 24 h, which does not change significantly compared to those of  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  (89%) and  $\text{NiS}_x/\text{NF}$  (88%), indicating that  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  has excellent OER stability. Based on the aforementioned studies, it can be seen that  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  exhibits better OER activity and kinetics and maintains desirable long-term stability compared to  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  and  $\text{NiS}_x/\text{NF}$ .

To further clarify the origin of the enhanced OER activity and kinetics of  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$ , we employed XPS to determine the interaction at the heterogeneous interface. As shown in Fig. S8<sup>†</sup>, the survey XPS shows the existence of elemental Ni, Fe, O and S in  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$ , elemental Ni, Fe and O in  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$ , and elemental Ni and S in  $\text{NiS}_x/\text{NF}$ , which is in accordance with the EDS mapping and STEM-EDS mapping results. The chemical states of  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$ ,  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  and  $\text{NiS}_x/\text{NF}$  were compared by high-resolution XPS. As shown in Fig. 3a, the binding energies of  $\text{Ni}^{2+}$  (855.1/872.8 eV) and  $\text{Ni}^{3+}$  (856.9/875.0 eV) of  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  were shifted between those of  $\text{Ni}^{2+}$  and  $\text{Ni}^{3+}$  in  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  and  $\text{NiS}_x/\text{NF}$ , which suggests that the interfacial interaction between  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  and  $\text{NiS}_x/\text{NF}$  resulted in the redistribution of charge at the interface. In addition,  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  and  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  have the same binding energies of  $\text{Fe}^{2+}$  (710.1/723.9 eV) and  $\text{Fe}^{3+}$  (713.3/727.4 eV), which suggests that there is no significant change in Fe binding energy before and after the introduction of  $\text{NiS}_x$  (Fig. S9<sup>†</sup>). Moreover, the S peak (Fig. 3b) and O peak (Fig. 3c) of  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  are shifted to smaller binding energies by 0.1 eV and 0.4 eV, respectively, with respect to  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$

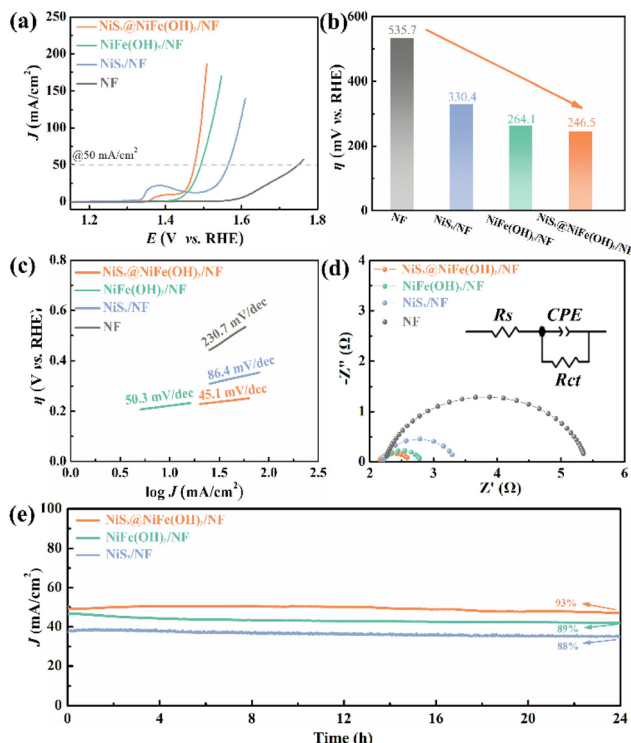
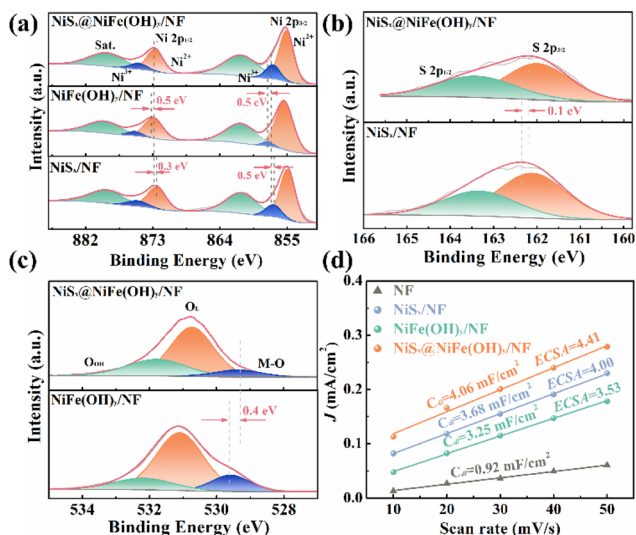


Fig. 2 OER performance of  $\text{NiS}_x/\text{NF}$ ,  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  and  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$ : (a) LSV curves, (b) overpotential values at 50 mA  $\text{cm}^{-2}$ , (c) Tafel slopes calculated using the LSV curves, (d) EIS spectra and (e)  $J$ - $T$  curves at 1.6 V vs. RHE for 24 h.

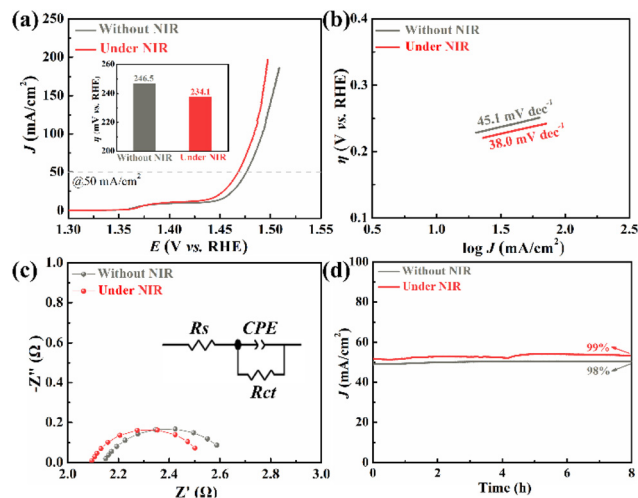


**Fig. 3** High-resolution XPS comparison of (a) Ni 2p, (b) S 2p and (c) O 1s for NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF, NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF and NiS<sub>x</sub>/NF. (d) ECSA values of NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF, NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF and NiS<sub>x</sub>/NF.

and NiS<sub>x</sub>/NF, which further proves that NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF and NiS<sub>x</sub>/NF have electron transfer at the interface of NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF.<sup>49,50</sup> Furthermore, it has been reported that small changes in the binding states of Ni can lead to the formation of increased active sites on OER electrocatalysts.<sup>51</sup> The larger ECSA on NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF (4.41) than that on NiS<sub>x</sub>/NF (4.00) and NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF (3.53) implies that the interfacial interaction of the heterogeneous structure of NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF can form more electrochemically active sites (Fig. 3d and Fig. S10<sup>†</sup>), and Ni is the main active site during the OER.

### 3.3 OER activity and kinetics of NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF under NIR light irradiation

After establishing NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF as the electrode that has the best OER activity in this work, we further evaluated the photothermal effect of NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF and attempted to further enhance its OER performance. To verify the impact of the photothermal effect on the electrocatalytic OER of NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF, we added 808 nm light (2 W cm<sup>-2</sup>) to irradiate the NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF sample during the OER test (NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF-NIR). As shown in Fig. 4a, as expected, the LSV curves show that the OER activity on NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF is increased under NIR light illumination, and the overpotential of NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF at 50 mA cm<sup>-2</sup> is 234.1 mV, which is lower by 12.4 mV than that of the unirradiated NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF. As shown in Fig. S12,<sup>†</sup> NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF-NIR has a higher TOF than NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF, indicating that NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF has a higher catalytic efficiency under NIR light irradiation. Furthermore, NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF under NIR light exhibited a Tafel slope of only 38.0 mV dec<sup>-1</sup>, which was lower than that of NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF without NIR light as well as those mentioned in related reports (Table S1<sup>†</sup>), suggesting the enhanced reaction kinetics (Fig. 4b). In order to understand the difference in the intrinsic catalytic activity of



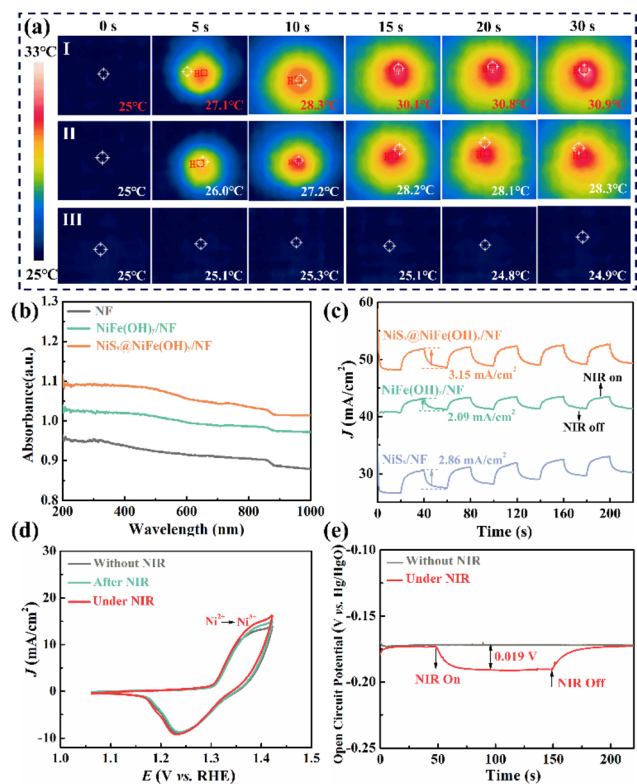
**Fig. 4** OER performance of NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF under and without NIR light: (a) LSV curves (inset: the overpotential at 50 mA cm<sup>-2</sup> of NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF under and without NIR light), (b) Tafel slopes derived from the LSV curves, (c) EIS spectra, and (d) J-T curves at 1.6 V vs. RHE for 8 h.

NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF under and without NIR light, the samples were subjected to EIS and ECSA measurements. As shown in Fig. 4c and Table S2,<sup>†</sup> NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF has lower solution resistance (*R*<sub>s</sub>) under NIR light irradiation (2.10 Ω), which is probably related to the accelerated ion transport at the electrode–electrolyte interface induced by the photothermal effect. In addition, NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF under NIR light shows an *R*<sub>ct</sub> value of 0.44 Ω, which is smaller than that of NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF without NIR light (0.50 Ω) (Table S3<sup>†</sup>). The larger ECSA on NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF under NIR light (5.01) than that of NiS<sub>x</sub>/NF (4.00) and NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF (3.53) suggests that the photothermal effect promotes the active sites of the NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF electrode and thus enhances the OER activity (Fig. S13<sup>†</sup>). To further investigate the OER stability, the J-T curves of NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF under NIR light were tested at 1.6 V vs. RHE for 8 h. As shown in Fig. 4d and Fig. S14,<sup>†</sup> NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF under NIR light illumination has increased OER activity, and its stability changes negligibly with respect to NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF without NIR light. NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF produced oxygen at a faster rate (0.58 mmol h<sup>-1</sup>) with NIR light than NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF without NIR light (0.44 mmol h<sup>-1</sup>) (Table S3<sup>†</sup>). As shown in Fig. S15,<sup>†</sup> the XRD patterns of NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF before and after NIR light irradiation test were consistent with that of the original NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF sample, indicating that there is no other crystalline material generation. In addition, the O<sub>2</sub> generation rates on NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF under and without NIR light irradiation are more clearly illustrated in ESI Video 1.<sup>†</sup>

Subsequently, we systematically investigated the origin of the enhanced OER kinetics and activity of NiS<sub>x</sub>@NiFe(OH)<sub>y</sub>/NF under near-infrared light irradiation. As mentioned before, the OER is a classical nonhomogeneous reaction, in which reaction rate dependence on the temperature can be deduced from

the Arrhenius equation. The temperature variations and thermal imaging pictures of  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  and  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  in 1.0 M KOH solution under NIR light are shown in Fig. 5a. It is obvious that  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  after the same time of NIR light irradiation has a higher electrode temperature than  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$ . Moreover, the negligible temperature change of the electrolyte (1.0 M KOH) excludes the effect of near-infrared light on the electrolyte. As shown in Fig. 5b, the UV-Vis-NIR absorption spectra show that  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  has a higher light absorption capacity than  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  and NF, which contributes significantly to its photo-thermal ability and is in agreement with the temperature test shown in Fig. 5a. Furthermore, as shown in Fig. 5c, under NIR light, the current response of  $\text{NiS}_x/\text{NF}$  ( $2.86 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$ ) is larger than that of  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  ( $2.09 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$ ) and is close to that of  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  ( $3.15 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$ ). As shown in Fig. S16 and S17,<sup>†</sup>  $\text{NiS}_x/\text{NF}$  under NIR light irradiation has a greater ECSA change than  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  under NIR light irradiation, which further indicates that  $\text{NiS}_x/\text{NF}$  has a stronger photothermal response than  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$ . From the above discussion, it can be suggested that the photothermal effect of  $\text{NiS}_x$  is the main reason for the increase of current response of  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$ .

Furthermore, some reports have found that the photothermal effect can promote the formation of a micro-electric field at the electrode.<sup>52</sup> To verify that possibility, the CV curves of  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  before, after and under NIR light illumination were first measured. As shown in Fig. 5d, upon irradiation with near-infrared light,  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  has an enhanced oxidation peak, which is consistent with the previous observation that the photothermal effect accelerates the OER kinetics with the promotion of more reactive active site generation ( $\text{Ni}^{2+} \rightarrow \text{Ni}^{3+}$ ). Furthermore, after NIR irradiation, the enhanced oxidation peak still appeared in the CV curve, suggesting that the photothermal effect can promote the redistribution of the surface charge of  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  and generate more active  $\text{Ni}^{3+}$  sites. As shown in Fig. S18,<sup>†</sup> it is noteworthy that the peak area ratio of  $\text{Ni}^{3+}$  in Ni 2p in high-resolution XPS increased from 19.6% (before NIR light irradiation) to 35.3% (after NIR light irradiation), while the peak area ratio of  $\text{Ni}^{2+}$  in Ni 2p in high-resolution XPS decreased from 52.8% (before NIR light irradiation) to 43.9% (after NIR light irradiation), which further suggested the rearrangement of the surface charge in  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$ . In addition, the open circuit potential (OCP) of  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  in the absence and presence of NIR light irradiation demonstrates variations in the surface electric field.<sup>43</sup> As shown in Fig. 5e, the open-circuit potential variation of  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  before and after NIR light irradiation is 0.019 V, which further indicates that the photothermal effect can promote the formation of a micro-electric field in  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$ .



**Fig. 5** (a) Thermal imaging pictures of I:  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  and II:  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  in 1.0 M KOH solution and III: 1.0 M KOH solution under NIR light irradiation. (b) UV-Vis absorption spectra of NF,  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  and  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$ . (c)  $J$ - $T$  curves at 1.6 V vs. RHE of  $\text{NiS}_x/\text{NF}$ ,  $\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  and  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$ . (d) CV curves of  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  before, under, and after NIR light illumination. (e) Open circuit potential (OCP) of  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  with and without NIR light illumination.

## 4. Conclusions

In summary, we demonstrated that the photothermal effect and its induced micro-electric field can significantly improve the thermodynamic and kinetics properties of the electrocatalytic OER on  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$ .  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  has an obvious heterojunction effect and can effectively absorb NIR light, which together improve the OER performance of  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$ . It is noteworthy that due to the photothermal effect and the induced micro-electric field, the OER performance of  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  is significantly enhanced. Compared with no NIR light irradiation, the overpotential at  $50 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$  and the Tafel slope of  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  under NIR light irradiation were  $234.1 \text{ mV}$  and  $38.0 \text{ mV dec}^{-1}$ , which were lower by  $12.4 \text{ mV}$  and  $7.1 \text{ mV dec}^{-1}$ , respectively. Furthermore,  $\text{NiS}_x@/\text{NiFe}(\text{OH})_y/\text{NF}$  under NIR irradiation was able to operate consistently at  $1.6 \text{ V vs. RHE}$  for 8 h with 99% activity maintained. This work provides inspiration for enhancing the thermodynamics and kinetics of electrocatalysts for the OER.

## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

## Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (22005254, 41702037, 52302220 and 52373087), the Natural Science Foundation of Sichuan Province (2023NSFSC1128), the Natural Science Foundation of Chongqing (2023NSCQ-MSX0210), the Project of Innovation Training Program for College Students in Sichuan Province (S202310619089), the Project of Southwest University of Science and Technology (20zx7142), and the Graduate Science and Technology Innovation Training Program Project of Chongqing University of Science and Technology (YKJXCX2220202 and YKJXCX2220520).

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