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Simultaneous glucose sensing and bio-hydrogen evolution from direct photoelectrocatalytic glucose oxidation on robust Cu$_2$O-TiO$_2$ electrodes

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We report, simultaneous photoelectrocatalytic (PEC) glucose sensing and bio-hydrogen generation for the first time from direct PEC oxidation of glucose at multifunctional and robust Cu$_2$O-TiO$_2$ photocatalysts. Striking improvement of 30% in overall H$_2$ gas evolution (~122 μmol hr$^{-1}$ cm$^{-2}$) by photoholes assisted glucose oxidation opens new platform in solar-driven PEC bio-hydrogen generation.

Light driven photosensitized water oxidation phenomenon is the key tool for accessing the photoholes at the valence band of semiconductor to advanced oxidation of chemical components in liquid or gas phase. In this context, direct photoelectrocatalytic (PEC) oxidation of glucose using semiconductor is an interesting approach to reforming the biomass into hydrogen fuel through artificial photosynthesis process. Previous reports on Pt decorated TiO$_2$ in the form of powder as well as electrode demonstrated the ability of ‘photoholes’ towards glucose oxidation for generating useful fuel such as hydrogen and oxygen. Although, metal (Pt) particles facilitate the charge separation at TiO$_2$/electrolyte interface, (a) the light blocking effect by Pt, (b) undesirable CO$_2$ generation through photo-Kolbe reaction that leads to poor selectivity in H$_2$ generation and (c) inadequate photoholes conduction at TiO$_2$ limits the practical implementation. Conversely, p-type semiconductors are the promising candidates in PEC water splitting process for collecting photoholes efficiently to Pt counter electrode. Nonetheless, developing a robust p-type semiconductor photoelectrode is currently a key challenge in the field of PEC biosensors and bio-fuel generation. In this context, cuprous oxide (Cu$_2$O), a p-type metal oxide with a band gap of ~2-2.6 eV is currently extensively studied in photocatalyst, solar cells, photosensor applications. Despite their good photoactivity, high binding energy, affordability and abundance occurrence, its photocorrosive tendency due to high native Cu vacancies remains a significant drawback. Thus, it is significant to improve the Cu$_2$O stability for efficient biomolecular oxidation. Recently, it has been reported that Cu$_2$O photocathode stability can be improved by post-coating thin layers of metal oxide (TiO$_2$) or carbon materials which may improve the PEC performance. On this note, electron conducting and transparent coatings of TiO$_2$ is an appropriate choice owing to the negligible obstruction of light reaching the photoactive Cu$_2$O layer. In addition, the presence of TiO$_2$ layer on Cu$_2$O could also facilitate the charge separation and electron transfer at electrode/electrolyte interfaces. Therefore, synergistic combination between single-oxide properties, such as low band-gap p-type Cu$_2$O and high reactivity of n-type TiO$_2$ could be the most appealing alternative for improving the PEC efficiency.

Glucose plays a vital role of a biomarker in the clinical therapy of diabetes. The recent substantial development of sensing technologies suggest the use of enzymes or noble metal catalysts for the successful oxidation of biomolecules; however, the stability and price remain intrinsic restrictions. Moreover, glucose is a well-recognised biofuel source which is low-cost, renewable and available as waste products of biomass processing industries (sugar, pulp and paper), which makes it an attractive sustainable source of bio-hydrogen. Despite the great progress achieved in hydrogen production from biomass over the past decades, there still remain significant challenges to design efficient, enzymeless and cost-effective means of producing hydrogen at exceptionally mild conditions.

Scheme 1. Illustration of direct photoelectrochemical glucose oxidation at Cu$_2$O/TiO$_2$ electrode. The electrons collected from both glucose electrooxidation and photocatalytic oxidation to the counter electrode by applied potential 0.7 V vs (Ag/AgCl).

Herein, we demonstrate for the first time, the simultaneous photoelectrochemical glucose biosensing and bio-hydrogen generation from direct PEC oxidation of glucose at highly stable
and sensitive Cu$_2$O-TiO$_2$ photoelectrodes. The PEC process of simultaneous glucose oxidation at Cu$_2$O-TiO$_2$ photoelectrodes and bio-hydrogen generation at Pt counter is proposed in Scheme 1. Under dark condition, the Cu$_2$O primarily acts as an electrocatalyst towards glucose oxidation at applied potential (0.7 V vs Ag/AgCl). This potential is substantially enough to achieve flat band at Cu$_2$O/TiO$_2$/electrolyte interfaces, and thus capable of collecting the oxidative electrons (dotted arrow in Scheme 1) to the collector terminal through Cu$_2$O and TiO$_2$ layers. Upon light illumination with similar applied potential, Cu$_2$O acts as a photoelectrocatalyst, which generates photoelectrons at conduction band (CB) and photoholes at valence band (VB). The photoholes from VB lying just positive of the oxygen evolution potential (+1.23 eV NHE) substantially drives the glucose oxidation. This photocatalytic glucose oxidation beneficially promotes the oxidative electrons (dotted arrow in Fig. 1a). Concurrently, fraction of photoelectrons will be injected in to the collector terminal, thus raise the overall bio-hydrogen evolution (bio-fuel) at Pt counter electrode.

The Cu$_2$O-TiO$_2$ photoelectrodes used in this study were prepared by forming CuO layer on transparent conducting oxide (TCO) substrate using spray pyrolysis process followed by sputter coating a thin layer of TiO$_2$ (See Supporting information S1). The crystalline structure of as-prepared CuO films was studied using x-ray diffraction technique (Fig. 1a). Two predominant peaks exhibited in Fig. 1a, at 35.3º and 38.4º, confirm the (002) and (111) crystallite phases, respectively corresponding to the tenorite structure CuO (JCPDS 45-0937).

![Fig.1](image)

**Fig.1.** (a) X-ray diffraction spectrum, (b) SEM image and (c) AFM image of spray coated CuO film; (d) AFM section analysis on CuO crystals across the line indicated in Fig.1(c).

The surface morphology of CuO films shows quasi crystallite shape (Fig 1b). Further, this quasi crystallite texture was confirmed by atomic force microscope (AFM) (Fig. 1c). From AFM section analysis, it is found that CuO crystals have distinct dimension of ~492 nm in diameter and ~395 nm in height. The chemical environment of CuO films before and after TiO$_2$ coating was studied by x-ray photoelectron spectrometer (XPS) and the corresponding results were presented in Fig. 2 (a) and (b). In pristine CuO films, predominant Cu2p$_{3/2}$ (933.2 eV) and Cu2p$_{1/2}$ (953.2 eV) peaks along with two strong satellite (SS) peaks were observed. These Cu2p strong satellite peaks at 949.1 eV and 961.9 eV correspond to the Cu2p$_{3/2}$ and Cu2p$_{1/2}$, respectively.

Furthermore, the atomic ratio of Cu and O was estimated from XPS spectra and found to be 0.3 and 0.7 Wt %, respectively. The shoulder peaks of Cu2p$_{3/2}$ and Cu2p$_{1/2}$ were shifted to lower binding energy implying that the CuO surface gets modified by TiO$_2$ post-deposition. Moreover, the SS peaks of CuO were disappeared upon TiO$_2$ post-deposition. This tendency indicates the Cu$_2$O phase formation (Cu$^{2+}$ to Cu$^{+}$ ions) in between TiO$_2$ and CuO.

![Fig.2](image)

**Fig.2.** XPS results of CuO films (a) Cu2p with and without TiO$_2$ post-deposition; (b) O1s core spectra without TiO$_2$ coating; (d) Ti 2p core spectra and (e) O1s core spectra of CuO films with TiO$_2$ coating.

The electrochemical (EC) and photoelectrochemical (PEC) response of CuO and Cu$_2$O-TiO$_2$ photoelectrodes in the presence and absence of glucose were examined using cyclic voltammetry as shown in Fig. 3(a) and (b), respectively. The aqueous solution of 0.1 M NaOH was used as electrolyte and the experiments were conducted at 50 mV/s scan rate. In the absence of glucose, the
CuO electrode showed dark current density $\sim 1.6$ mACm$^{-2}$ at negative applied potential of $-0.55$ V vs (Ag/AgCl). Upon light illumination, the photocurrent density value was enhanced to $\sim 3.7$ mACm$^{-2}$. This explains the complete photoelectrocatalytic water splitting on CuO surface (using photoelectrons at CB) and water oxidation at Pt surface through collecting the photoholes from VB of CuO. This ensures the photoelectron and photohole generation at CuO under illumination with negative potential.\textsuperscript{35} On the other hand, the current density showed $\sim 1.6$ mACm$^{-2}$ at positive applied potential $0.7$ V vs (Ag/AgCl) is related to hydrogen generation on Pt surface as explained in Scheme 1. Strikingly, the current density was enhanced to $\sim 7.9$ mACm$^{-2}$ (dark condition) in presence of 5 mM glucose in electrolyte. This infers that the electrooxidation of glucose takes place at CuO surface at 0.7 V vs (Ag/AgCl), where glucose is converted into gluconic acid.\textsuperscript{30} This process exhibits one electron to the external circuit (dotted arrow in Scheme 1) and thus raises the current nearly fivefold compared to electrolyte without glucose. Nonetheless, no change in current density was observed under light illumination. This may be due to the poor charge separation (electron and hole) after photocarrier generation due to photocorrosion issue on CuO surface, since the redox potentials for the reduction and oxidation of copper oxide lie within the bandgap.\textsuperscript{18}

\[ \text{CuO} + \text{H}_2\text{O} + 2e^- \leftrightarrow 2\text{Cu} + 2\text{OH}^- \quad (E^\circ = +0.47 \text{ V}) \] (1)

Therefore, photoholes at VB of CuO is inefficient to drive the photocatalytic oxidation of glucose due to detrimental corrosive effect (equation 1). Unlike pristine CuO, the Cu$_2$O-TiO$_2$ photoelectrode exhibited significant (Fig.3b) current density difference between the dark ($\sim 3.6$ mACm$^{-2}$) and light illumination ($\sim 4.6$ mACm$^{-2}$) conditions in 5 mM glucose, which clearly demonstrates that TiO$_2$ deposition on CuO triggers the photocatalytic oxidation of glucose (dotted arrow indicated in Scheme 1). Here, TiO$_2$ acts as passivation layer and prevents the corrosion. Another plausible reason for enhancing the current density could be the resultant band gap energy tailoring from $\sim 2.2$ eV to $\sim 1.82$ eV, (See supporting information S3) which could maximize the visible light harvesting photons for photocatalytic glucose oxidation process through converting their crystalline phase to Cu$_2$O as is explained from XPS results (Fig.1c).

In order to realize the stability of electrodes, we have performed the electrocatalytic experiments using CuO and Cu$_2$O-TiO$_2$ electrodes in both dark and light illumination conditions (Fig.3c).

The Cu$_2$O-TiO$_2$ electrode showed excellent stability and reliable performance in both dark and light conditions. Initially, the CuO electrode showed high current density than that of Cu$_2$O-TiO$_2$, but later it was found to be degrading rapidly and almost no current was generated after 2000 sec. This clearly evidence that the TiO$_2$ post-deposition acts as passivation layer to CuO and thus prevents the corrosion and thus affords prolonged operation in both dark and light illumination environment. The stable performance and photocurrent enhancement observed at Cu$_2$O-TiO$_2$ electrodes in presence of glucose further encouraged us to testify the PEC sensing ability at different glucose concentrations.

Fig.3d shows the dependence of photocurrent with that of the glucose concentration. The inset shows the typical time-based photocurrent response of direct PEC glucose biosensor at lower and higher glucose concentration. The calibration curve shows a linear increase in photocurrent between 375 µM to 1.5 mM glucose and reaches the saturation at about 2.5 mM glucose. This wide linear range with 250 µM detection limit attests the direct PEC glucose sensing ability of Cu$_2$O-TiO$_2$ photoelectrodes. (See Supporting information Fig. S4). The photocurrent conversion efficiency (PCE) of the Cu$_2$O-TiO$_2$ photoelectrode was estimated from Fig.3(b) using the following relation:\textsuperscript{37}

\[ \text{PCE} = \left[ \frac{(1.23-V_{lhe})I}{(PAI)\times 100} \right] \] (2)

The $V_{lhe}$ is the applied potential between counter electrode and photoanode and calculated using the relation $E_{\text{RHE}} = E_{\text{Ag/AgCl}} + 0.197 + \text{pH}(0.059)$. The pH of the 0.1M NaOH electrolyte is 11. $I$ is the current density achieved from PEC process. $P$ is the power of the light source (100 mWcm$^{-2}$). A is the area of the electrode (1 cm$^2$). The estimated PCE is presented in Fig.4.

The maximum PCE of water oxidation performance in Cu$_2$O-TiO$_2$ was achieved $\sim 0.8\%$ at $\sim 0.85$ V RHE (in the absence of glucose). At high applied potential $\sim 1.23$ V RHE, the PCE value is found to reduce $\sim 0.05\%$ due to most of the water molecules were oxidized at lower potential $\sim 0.85$V though Cu$_2$O-TiO$_2$ can have wide window potential. In the case of glucose included electrolyte, at similar potential $\sim 1.23$ V RHE, the PCE of $\sim 0.35\%$ was achieved compared to glucose-free electrolyte. This implies that Cu$_2$O-TiO$_2$ electrode have feasibility of direct glucose
oxidation at ~1.23 V RHE and promotes the overall hydrogen generation at Pt CE through supplying additional electrons in to the circuit.

![Photocurrent conversion efficiency of CuO-TiO2 photoelectrode as a function of applied potential.](image)

Fig. 4. Photocurrent conversion efficiency of CuO-TiO2 photoelectrode as a function of applied potential.

The feasible PEC current generation from glucose based electrolyte (Fig. 3c and d) endorse the possible fuel generation. As is explained in Fig.1a, the electrons collected from both electrooxidation of glucose and photoelectrocatalytic oxidation of glucose can be traversed to Pt electrode and thus utilized for bio-hydrogen generation. This phenomenon was testified in three electrode photoelectrochemical system. The output gas evolved for a period of one hour from both EC and PEC glucose oxidation on CuO-TiO2 electrodes were collected and analyzed by gas chromatography (GC) (Fig. 4a). The GC spectra show well-defined peak of H2 and peak intensity was enhanced upon light illumination. Our results endorse that the H2 fuel generation from electrocatalytic glucose oxidation was further promoted with photocatalytic glucose oxidation. The other two peaks in Fig.4a correspond to atmospheric O2 and N2 during the sample collection. Further, the quantity of H2 fuel evolved from CuO-TiO2 photoelectrodes under different experimental conditions were estimated from GC spectra and are presented in Fig.4b. The CuO-TiO2 electrodes exhibit small quantity of H2 (~16 µmol.hr⁻¹.cm⁻²) gas from direct water splitting phenomena (without glucose). In presence of 2.5 mM glucose in the electrolyte, ~96 µmol.hr⁻¹.cm⁻² of H2 fuel was generated at Pt in dark which could be attributed to the direct electrochemical glucose oxidation.

Interestingly, the PEC oxidation of glucose generated the maximum quantity of H2 gas, ~122 µmol.hr⁻¹.cm⁻². This clearly demonstrates that the photoholes generated at valence band of Cu2O additionally drives glucose oxidation, which beneficially traverses more electrons to the external circuit (Scheme 1), and thus promotes the overall H2 fuel generation by ~30%. The contribution of photocatalysis phenomena on glucose oxidation using Cu2O/TiO2 electrode is in agreement with recent demonstration of suspended photocatalytic glucose reformation using different crystal facet of Cu2O.15 The similar hydrogen generation performance from glucose biofuel cells has been summarized by Lu et al.18 The yield of hydrogen product can be doubled from PEC glucose oxidation process while using tandem photoelectrodes. Esposito et al demonstrate the tandem electrode based glucose biofuel cell using WO3 and CdTe photoanode with tungsten carbide (WC) photocathode.39 By utilizing co-catalyst (Ni(OH)2) materials on anode surface (TiO2, Fe2O3) could reduce driving potential is an another attractive strategy for improving the glucose bio-fuel cells.40, 41

Despite all of the evidences for substantial amount of bio-hydrogen generation, the Cu2O-TiO2 system still demands further excellence in terms of detection range as well their stability in industrial biomass waste. Further research is underway to improve their detection range via enhancing the physical active area or internal surface area of Cu2O-TiO2 electrodes. Moreover, analysing the stability of Cu2O-TiO2 electrodes using industrial biomass waste as feed stock is futuristic for realizing the artificial photosynthesis in bio-hydrogen generation. When compared to the conventional biomass reformation techniques (steam gasification, fast pyrolysis or supercritical conversion) which demands high temperature, undoubtedly, the direct photoelectrocatalytic glucose oxidation using visible light candidates afford low-cost biomass reformation. The central part of the results on glucose sensing with hydrogen generation can be transformed to designing self-powered sensors using the output hydrogen and atmospheric oxygen in the form of fuel cells.

![Typical GC trace of evolved hydrogen gas from the electrochemical glucose oxidation experiments using Cu2O/TiO2 electrodes under dark and light illumination conditions (2 mM glucose).](image)

Fig. 5. (c) Typical GC trace of evolved hydrogen gas from the electrochemical glucose oxidation experiments using Cu2O/TiO2 electrodes under dark and light illumination conditions (2 mM glucose)
was included in the electrolyte); (b) measured amount of hydrogen gas from electrochemical and photoelectrochemical measurements using CuO/TiO$_2$ electrodes in different conditions (1 mM NaOH aqueous solution with 2.5 mM glucose is used as electrolyte; 0.7 V is applied to potential for all experiments).

In conclusion, we have developed multifunctional and highly stable CuO-TiO$_2$ photodeode for direct photoelectrocatalytic oxidation of glucose. This material combination allows for spontaneous direct PEC oxidation of glucose under light illumination, in which photoholes are utilized for enhanced glucose oxidation. The high magnitude photocurrent of about ~4.6 mA cm$^{-2}$ was generated in presence of 5mM glucose. Moreover, simultaneous bio-hydrogen generation from direct PEC oxidation of glucose was demonstrated, which can serve either as an excellent alternative technique in biomass reformation or self-powered biosensors using the output hydrogen and atmospheric oxygen in the form of fuel cells.

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$^{†}$ Electronic Supplementary Information (ESI) available: [Experimental and characterization details, surface wetablity, optical band gap energy, glucose sensitivity results]. See DOI: 10.1039/b000000x/


