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Photo-electrochemical hydrogen production from neutral phosphate buffer and seawater using micro-structured p-Si photo-electrodes functionalized by solution-based methods†

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Solar fuels such as H₂ generated from sunlight and seawater using earth-abundant materials are expected to be a crucial component of a next generation renewable energy mix. We herein report a systematic analysis of the photo-electrochemical performance of TiO₂ coated, microstructured p-Si photo-electrodes (p-Si/TiO₂) that were functionalized with CoO_x and NiO_x for H₂ generation. These photocathodes were synthesized from commercial p-Si wafers employing wet chemical methods. In neutral phosphate buffer and standard 1 sun illumination, the p-Si/TiO₂/NiO_x photoelectrode showed a photocurrent density of -1.48 mA cm^{-2} at zero bias (0 V_{RHE}), which was three times and 15 times better than the photocurrent densities of p-Si/TiO₂/CoO_x and p-Si/TiO₂, respectively. No decline in activity was observed over a five hour test period, yielding a Faradaic efficiency of 96% for H₂ production. Based on the electrochemical characterizations and the high energy resolution fluorescence detected X-ray absorption near edge structure (HERFD-XANES) and emission spectroscopy measurements performed at the Ti K α_1 fluorescence line, the superior performance of the p-Si/TiO₂/NiO_x photoelectrode was attributed to improved charge transfer properties induced by the NiO_x coating on the protective TiO₂ layer, in combination with a higher catalytic activity of NiO_x for H₂-evolution. Moreover, we report here an excellent photo-electrochemical performance of p-Si/TiO₂/NiO_x photoelectrode in corrosive artificial seawater (pH 8.4) with an unprecedented photocurrent density of 10 mA cm^{-2} at an applied potential of $-0.7 \text{ V}_{\text{RHE}}$, and of 20 mA cm^{-2} at $-0.9 \text{ V}_{\text{RHE}}$. The applied bias photon-to-current conversion efficiency (ABPE) at $-0.7 \text{ V}_{\text{RHE}}$ and 10 mA cm^{-2} was found to be 5.1%.

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Introduction

The CO₂ released by burning fossil fuels for transportation, production of electricity and heating is a major contributor to global warming.^{1–3} In order to limit the greenhouse effect, it is necessary to replace fossil fuels with renewable and carbon-neutral or 'green' fuels.¹ On Earth's surface, sunlight is the most abundant source of free energy, and seawater can provide a plentiful supply of electrons and protons as ingredients for

making solar fuels.^{4–8} Natural photosynthesis and recent lab-scale artificial photosynthesis devices have demonstrated high efficiencies in solar-driven water splitting into molecular hydrogen and oxygen.^{9–12} However, enabling global-scale solar-fuel generation requires the fabrication of devices, in particular of photoelectrodes, from earth-abundant materials. To obtain the maximal device performance, the interplay between light-harvesting, charge separation and electron/proton transport, as well as water oxidation and reduction catalysis needs to be carefully optimized^{2,3,12–20}

The intrinsic band gap (1.1 eV) of silicon photo-electrodes make them capable of absorbing a broad spectrum of the solar light. Over the past decades, they have thus gathered much attention towards photo-electrochemical (PEC) water splitting.^{21–26} The band structure of n-type Si promotes the photo-anodic oxygen evolution reaction (OER),^{27,28} while p-type Si facilitates the photo-cathodic hydrogen evolution reaction (HER).²² However, the difference between the potentials of the valence band edge of p-Si and that of the H⁺/H₂ redox couple is

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relatively small which limits the photo-voltage and leads to slow HER kinetics.²⁹ The surface area of the Si photo-electrodes can be significantly increased *via* nano or micro structuring.³⁰ This not only increases light absorption of Si but also improves HER kinetics by shortening charge carrier transport pathways.^{24,31}

When Si is placed in an aqueous environment, it forms an insulating oxide layer, which significantly reduces its HER efficiency.³² In addition, Si is only stable at strongly acidic³³ and alkaline³⁴ pH if protected. Both processes can be suppressed highly efficiently by applying a thin TiO₂ over coating.^{35–37} In most studies the fabrication of the TiO₂ protective layer involves the use of relatively expensive high vacuum technology such as atomic layer deposition (ALD).^{34,38–40} While ALD is used industrially for applying thin metal layers during the production of electronic components for computers and other electronic devices, it may still be useful to explore cheap and scalable wet-chemical methods for producing large areas of coatings of 20–50 nm thickness.^{41,42} The performance of Si/TiO₂ photo-electrodes can be improved by decoration with suitable co-catalysts.^{38,43} Decoration with NiO_x has been studied for improving OER catalysis,^{27,44,45} but there are only a few studies on the application of NiO_x as HER catalysts at neutral (or near neutral) pH.^{46–49} To the best of our knowledge, NiO_x has not yet been studied as HER co-catalyst on the surface of p-Si/TiO₂ for photoelectrochemical seawater reduction to H₂.

Herein, we report the fabrication of efficient HER photo-electrodes consisting of CoO_x or NiO_x decorated p-Si/TiO₂. The photo-electrodes were prepared by micro-structuring commercial p-Si wafers using a well-documented electroless wet etching technique.^{50,51} The resulting microwire surface was coated with a protective TiO₂ layer and subsequently functionalized with CoO_x or NiO_x co-catalysts using simple solution-based techniques. The electrodes obtained by the

various fabrication steps were systematically studied, and the photo-electrochemical responses of the final p-Si/TiO₂/NiO_x and p-Si/TiO₂/CoO_x electrodes were measured in neutral pH phosphate buffer and in artificial seawater at pH 8.4. The PEC performance of functionalized p-Si photoelectrodes were also studied without a TiO₂ layer to establish the effect of TiO₂ as efficient charge separation layer between p-Si and the co-catalysts. Detailed electrochemical and X-ray spectroscopic studies were performed to elucidate the origin of the significantly better performance of p-Si/TiO₂/NiO_x as compared to p-Si/TiO₂/CoO_x.

Results and discussion

Preparation and structural characterization of HER photo-electrodes

The experimental steps involved in the synthesis of our p-Si photo-electrodes are summarized schematically in Fig. 1 (see ESI† for experimental methods). After a reductive cleaning of the commercial p-Si wafers to remove the surface SiO₂, wet etching was employed to obtain high-aspect ratio micro-structured p-Si electrodes.^{50,51} These ‘as-synthesized’ p-Si photo-electrodes (Fig. 2(a) and (b)) were subsequently spin-coated in two steps, first with a TiO₂ sol and subsequently with either a NiO_x or CoO_x sol. Each spin-coating step was followed by drying at room temperature and calcination at 380 °C. The scanning electron microscopy (SEM) top and side views of the as-synthesized p-Si (Fig. 2(a) and (b)) show the microstructure morphology. Fig. 2(c)–(f) show that the sol–gel method in combination with spin coating resulted in the formation of a protective TiO₂ overcoating and a co-catalysts film that fully covers the p-Si. The energy dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDX) cross-sections of the functionalized p-Si photo-electrodes are

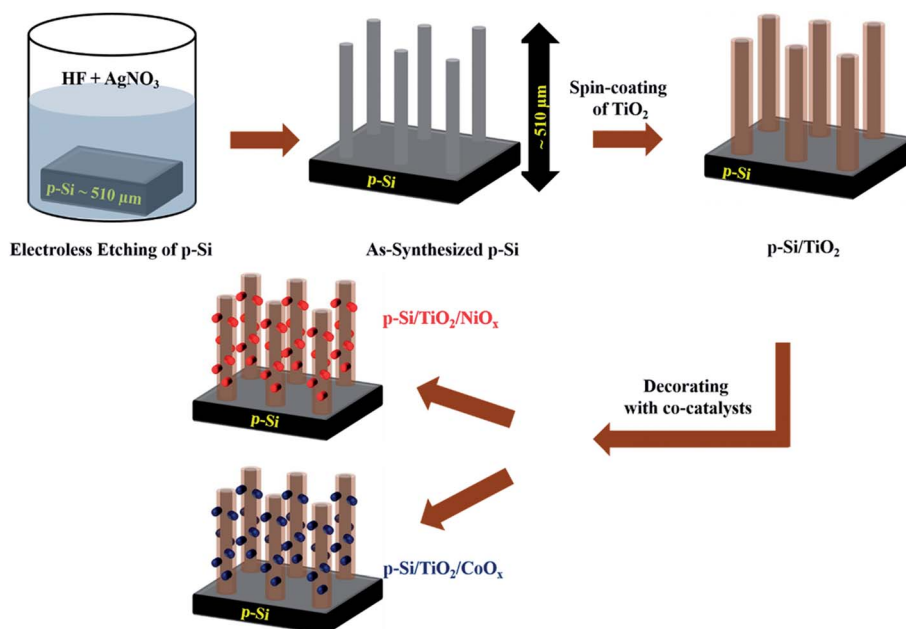


Fig. 1 Schematic representation (not to scale) of the preparation steps of p-Si micro-wires by wet-etching, their coating with TiO₂ and subsequent functionalization with NiO_x or CoO_x *via* spin coating and sintering. The procedure is described in detail in the ESI.†



shows that the current densities obtained are much smaller in absence of the intermittent TiO_2 layer, indicating that function of the TiO_2 layer goes far beyond a simple protective function. The magnitude of the photo current is illustrated for the fully assembled photo-electrodes in Fig. 3d by comparing the corresponding light and dark traces.

The same trends as for the photo currents are also seen in the respective onset potentials (V_{onset}) for H_2 -evolution, here defined as the potential needed for reaching a net photocurrent density of -0.1 mA cm^{-2} .⁵³ A positive (anodic) shift of the onset potential (V_{onset}) was observed for the co-catalyst functionalized electrodes as compared to as-synthesized and p-Si/ TiO_2 : the V_{onset} of the control p-Si/ TiO_2 sample was observed at $-0.66 V_{\text{RHE}}$, whereas those for p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2/\text{CoO}_x$ and p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2/\text{NiO}_x$ were shifted to $+0.27 V_{\text{RHE}}$ and $+0.42 V_{\text{RHE}}$, respectively (ESI Table S1†). The V_{onset} value for our p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2/\text{NiO}_x$ photoelectrode is remarkable when compared to a recent report by Zhang and coworkers,³³ where a $V_{\text{onset}} = +0.25 V_{\text{RHE}}$ ($j = -0.1 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$) was obtained for p-Si/ NiCoSe_x nanopillars in $0.5 \text{ M H}_2\text{SO}_4$ where the concentration of protons is 10^6 times higher as compared to the neutral pH electrolyte employed here.^{33,43} The excellent performance of NiO_x at neutral pH condition, which is further manifested by the detailed comparison to further co-catalysts functionalized p-Si based photo-electrodes reported in the literature (ESI Table S1†), may be attributed either to an intrinsically better HER performance of NiO_x compared to CoO_x , and/or to a superior charge transfer between p-Si and the NiO_x *via* the protective TiO_2 underlayer. This will be analysed in subsequent sections.

Photochemical H_2 generation in neutral phosphate buffer

The photo-generation of H_2 was measured using gas chromatography (GC) at a constant potential of $0 V_{\text{RHE}}$. Fig. 4a shows the results for p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2/\text{CoO}_x$ (blue) and p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2/\text{NiO}_x$ (red). Over a period of 5 hours of continuous illumination, a near linear production of H_2 was observed yielding $\sim 128 \mu\text{mol cm}^{-2}$ and $\sim 44 \mu\text{mol cm}^{-2}$ of H_2 for p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2/\text{NiO}_x$ and p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2/\text{CoO}_x$ respectively. The simultaneously recorded photocurrent density (Fig. 4b) was essentially stable at -1.48 mA cm^{-2} (p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2/\text{NiO}_x$) and -0.48 mA cm^{-2} (p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2/\text{CoO}_x$) over the five hours of the measurements, indicating a total lifetime extending by far the chosen duration of this experiment. XES scans taken after these experiments demonstrate that Pt from the counter electrode was not deposited onto our working electrodes during these experiments (ESI Fig. S8†). This results in a Faradaic efficiency of 96% (p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2/\text{NiO}_x$) and 93% (p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2/\text{CoO}_x$) and in applied bias photon to current conversion efficiencies (ABPE) of 1.74% for p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2/\text{NiO}_x$ and 0.54% for p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2/\text{CoO}_x$ at $0 V_{\text{RHE}}$. The excellent performance of NiO_x may in part also be attributed to its conversion into $\text{Ni}(\text{OH})_2$ upon contact with water.^{48,49,54} $\text{Ni}(\text{OH})_2$ formation is in agreement with the XPS spectra taken after the 5 hour performance test (ESI Fig. S5†). While we cannot exclude that a transient light-induced formation of NiOOH contributes to the excellent performance of NiO_x , as suggested recently for NiO_x nanoparticles,⁵⁴ we do not observe a stable NiOOH formation in the above mentioned XPS spectra, as expected under negative bias.

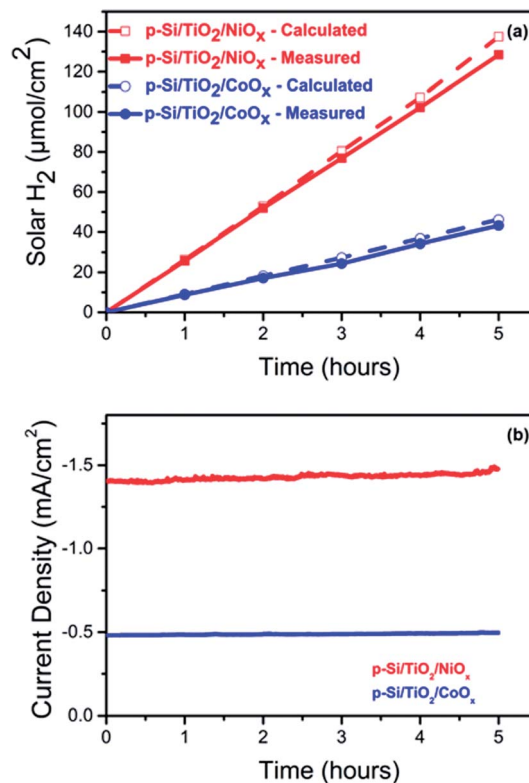


Fig. 4 Comparison of (a) the calculated and measured solar hydrogen production per geometric surface area of the photoelectrode and (b) of the current density of NiO_x (red) and CoO_x (blue) functionalized p-Si photo-electrodes over 5 hours of continuous operation. The data displayed in (a) and (b) were obtained simultaneously at $0.0 V_{\text{RHE}}$ and 1 sun illumination.

Charge transport kinetics

To understand the differences between the photo-electrochemical performance of non-functionalized and NiO_x - or CoO_x -functionalized p-Si/ TiO_2 photo-electrodes, the transport of photoelectrons generated in p-Si to the surface and further to the protons in the phosphate buffer (pH 7.0) were studied by using electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS). The Nyquist plots of the EIS data measured at 1 sun illumination are shown in Fig. 5 along with the equivalent circuit diagram employed for their analysis. The smaller semi-circle (high frequency region) corresponds to the resistance for the charge transfer from p-Si through TiO_2 to the surface (R_{CT1} , CPE_1), whereas the larger semicircle (low frequency region) corresponds to the photoelectrode/electrolyte interfacial charge transfer resistance described by R_{CT2} and CPE_2 . The data in Fig. 5 and ESI Table S2† show that the charge transport resistance for both processes is smallest for NiO_x , and increases for p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2/\text{CoO}_x$ and is largest for the non-functionalized p-Si/ TiO_2 . R_{CT1} increases from 807Ω to 1672Ω and 1763Ω , while R_{CT2} from 2519Ω to 6646Ω and $29\,840 \Omega$. The effective R_s also increases in the same order, indicating that p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2/\text{NiO}_x$ has the best charge transfer kinetics.⁵⁵

To further investigate the electronic and interfacial properties, the flat band potential (V_{FB}) and the carrier concentration



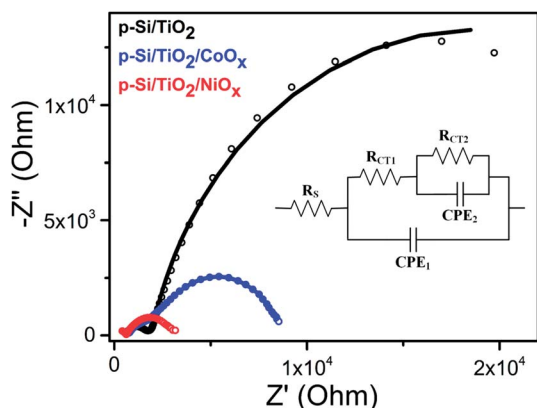


Fig. 5 Nyquist plots of p-Si/TiO₂ (black), p-Si/TiO₂/CoO_x (blue), p-Si/TiO₂/NiO_x (red) measured at 0.0 V_{RHE} under 1 sun illumination. The inset shows the equivalent circuit employed for analyzing the Nyquist plots. The fit data are provided in ESI Table S2.†

(N_D) were studied by Mott–Schottky measurements. Fig. 6(a–c) show that all photo-electrodes display a negative slope in the Mott–Schottky plots, consistent with the p-type doping of the Si substrate. The carrier concentrations (N_D) of the photo-electrodes were calculated from the slopes of Mott–Schottky plots, yielding values of $1.52 \times 10^{14} \text{ cm}^{-3}$, $1.98 \times 10^{15} \text{ cm}^{-3}$ and $3.73 \times 10^{15} \text{ cm}^{-3}$ for p-Si/TiO₂ and CoO_x or NiO_x functionalized photo-electrodes, respectively. Thus, both CoO_x and NiO_x functionalized photo-electrodes show one-order higher donor densities compared to the p-Si/TiO₂ control sample. This is in line with the observed H₂ generation rates at neutral pH, as well as with the order of the current densities and the charge transfer properties described above.

By fitting the linear regions (minimum range of 200 mV)⁵⁶ of the Mott–Schottky plots and extrapolating the line to the X-axis, the flat band potential V_{FB} can be deduced. Significant differences were observed: the V_{FB} of the Si/TiO₂ control sample was 0.63 V_{RHE}, whereas V_{FB} of the CoO_x and NiO_x modified photo-electrodes were 0.68 V_{RHE} and 0.79 V_{RHE}, respectively. The anodic shifts of 0.05 V and 0.16 V compared to the control indicate that p-Si/TiO₂/NiO_x has the least recombination losses,⁵⁷ suggesting that NiO_x passivates the surface defects more efficiently than CoO_x. The more positive anodic shifts of the V_{FB}

for the p-Si/TiO₂/NiO_x may be attributed to dissipation of potential drop at the Helmholtz layer and space charge region at the p-Si/TiO₂/NiO_x – electrolyte interface.⁴⁵ An anodically shifted V_{FB} enhances the HER kinetics by lowering the potential for transporting electrons to the surface.^{46,58–62}

Effects of co-catalysts on the local geometry of TiO₂

The electrochemical characterization of our photo-electrodes shows that the charge transfer properties of the interfacial TiO₂ layer are improved to various degrees by applying the CoO_x or NiO_x co-catalyst layers and sintering at 380 °C for two hours, indicating a modification of the TiO₂ coating by this procedure. In addition, the significant and different performance increases of p-Si/CoO_x vs. p-Si/TiO₂/CoO_x and p-Si/NiO_x vs. p-Si/TiO₂/NiO_x indicate an important role of the TiO₂ layer for the overall performance of the photo-electrodes. Thus, K-edge HERFD-XANES measurements were performed at the Ti K-edge (Fig. 7a and b) to elucidate changes in the atomic and electronic structure of TiO₂ induced by co-catalyst decoration. A schematic view of the optics and the experimental set up is presented elsewhere.^{63,64} The pre-edge region of the XAS spectra (4967 to 4976 eV) is particularly sensitive to the symmetry at the Ti sites.^{65,66} The pre-edge of crystalline TiO₂ has three characteristic peaks, denoted as A1, A2 and A3.⁶⁷ The pre-edge peaks A2 and A3 mainly arise from dipolar transitions from the Ti 1s shell and are thus affected by p–d mixing,^{66,68} which in turn depends on the local bonding geometry. In contrast, the quadrupolar 1s to 3d transition gives rise to A1 and the low energy shoulder in A2.^{69,70} Thus the number and position of the peaks in the pre-edge region contain information about the local coordination of Ti in TiO₂.⁶⁷ In anatase and amorphous TiO₂, the intensity of this shoulder is particularly sensitive to the presence of low coordination Ti sites as demonstrated by investigations of TiO₂ nanoparticles.^{71,72} Additional structural information can be obtained from the spectral shape of the post-edge region (B and C in Fig. 7a), which derives from the excitation of a 1s electron to one of the unoccupied states with p-symmetry with respect to Ti. Such transitions are highly sensitive to the local structure around the absorber.⁶⁷

Fig. 7a shows the HERFD-XANES spectra of p-Si/TiO₂, p-Si/TiO₂/CoO_x, and p-Si/TiO₂/NiO_x, while the reference spectra of

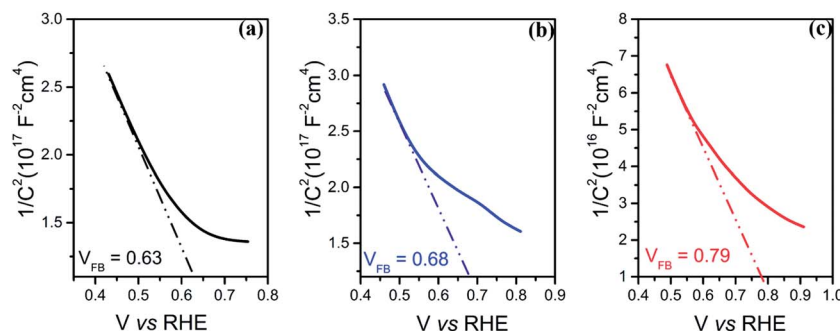


Fig. 6 Mott–Schottky measurements of (a) p-Si/TiO₂ (b) p-Si/TiO₂/CoO_x and (c) p-Si/TiO₂/NiO_x.



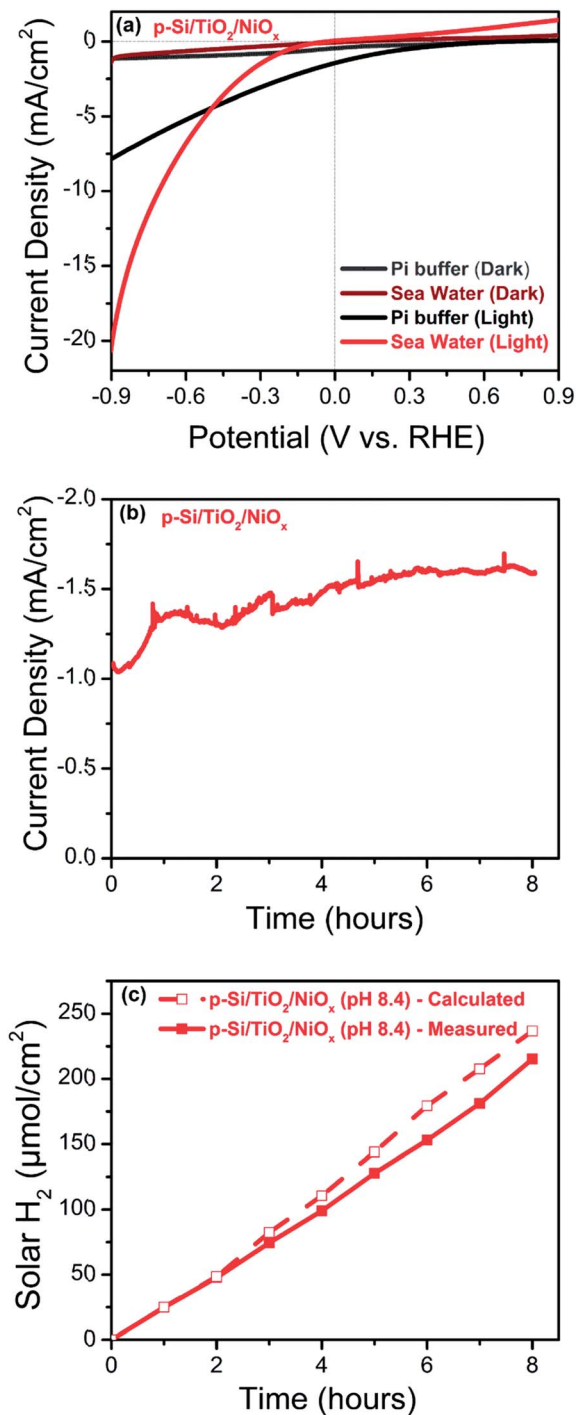


Fig. 8 Photo-electrochemical performance of the p-Si/TiO₂/NiO_x photoelectrode recorded under 1 sun illumination in artificial seawater at pH 8.4 (red) or pH 7.0 (black; 0.2 M phosphate buffer): (a) linear sweep voltammograms, (b) photo-current density measured at $-0.3 V_{\text{RHE}}$ and (c) comparison of calculated (open squares) and measured (closed squares) photo generated hydrogen per geometric surface area of the photo-electrode at $-0.3 V_{\text{RHE}}$ and 1 sun.

Conclusions

We demonstrate here a simple solution-based approach for the synthesis of photo-electrodes with earth abundant materials.

The photo-electrodes presented in this study can harvest solar energy and utilize it for splitting corrosive seawater, making it an attractive system for large-scale application. Our finding of sustained H₂ evolution with $>1.2\%$ ABPE in artificial seawater using a p-Si/TiO₂/NiO_x at a bias of $-0.3 V_{\text{RHE}}$ is highly encouraging, but further significant improvements to optimize the presented photo-electrodes are needed before practical applications become feasible. Importantly, the dual effect of NiO_x, on the charge transfer through the protective TiO₂ layer and for HER catalysis, points towards new ways for photoelectrode manufacturing.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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