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Synthesis of 3D porous CeO₂/reduced graphene oxide xerogel composite and low level detection of H₂O₂



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1. Introduction

The ultra-low density graphene xerogel having continuous porosities, high surface areas, and high electrical conductivity has recently attracted great attention due to its promising potential for the energy storage/conversion, catalysis, high performance nanocomposites and sensing device applications [1-8]. Inorganic nanomaterials having large surface to volume ratio and good catalysis have been largely stimulated for fabricating the nonenzymatic sensor for H₂O₂ [9–12]. An effective method to enhance the electrochemical performance of these nanomaterials is to incorporate it with the carbonaceous materials. The carbon material can form a homogeneous matrix which will enhance the electronic conductivity and act as a buffer to accommodate the volume change in the inorganic metal oxides. Among the metal oxide nanoparticles, only a very few researchers investigated electrochemical properties of CeO₂ [4,13–16]. Furthermore, some of the interesting properties like electrocatalytic, high surface area, non-toxicity, biocompatibility, oxygen storage capacity, chemical stability and high electron transfer capability make CeO₂ a promising material for electrochemical sensor [17-22].

A reliable, fast, accurate, and low level detection of H_2O_2 has been the central task in various fields of analytical chemistry from environmental protection [23,24] to biosensors utilizing enzymes

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ABSTRACT

A novel synthetic approach has been designed to prepare CeO₂/reduced graphene oxide (rGO) xerogel composite. The CeO₂/rGO xerogel composite electrode displays much enhanced performance for the catalytic reduction of H_2O_2 than the single component CeO₂. The CeO₂/rGO modified glassy carbon electrode displayed a wide linear range (60.7 nM-3.0 μ M), and low level of detection limit (30.40 nM) for H_2O_2 and much higher sensitivity than that of CeO₂ nanoparticles modified electrode. The sensor fabricated by the xerogel composite was fast, stable, and reliable to the detection of hydrogen peroxide.

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[25–30]. There are several disadvantages of the enzyme-modified electrodes, such as instability, high cost of enzymes and complicated immobilization procedure. The activity of enzymes can be easily affected by temperature, pH value, and toxic chemicals. In order to overcome these problems, considerable attention has been paid to develop nonenzymatic electrodes, for instance, noble metals, metal alloys, and metal nanoparticles [31–33]. These kinds of electrodes have displayed the drawbacks of low sensitivity, poor selectivity and high cost. Therefore, the development of a cheap and highly sensitive catalyst for nonenzymatic H_2O_2 detection is still in great demand. With this motivation, we have demonstrated a general strategy to achieve optimum electrochemical performance by constructing a 3D laminated architecture from a combination of nanostructured CeO₂ and reduced graphene oxide (rGO).

Here we report a simple way to synthesize a hybrid 3D xerogel architecture using a sol-gel route consisting of CeO_2 nanoparticles decorated on rGO nanosheets. The as-prepared xerogel composite was then fabricated into an electrochemical nonenzymatic hydrogen peroxide sensor, which exhibited good electrocatalytic activity towards hydrogen peroxide reduction.

2. Experimental

2.1. Synthesis of CeO₂/reduced graphene oxide (rGO) xerogel composite

The graphene oxide (GO) was obtained from natural flake graphite powder by a modified Hummers method [34,35]. CeO₂/rGO porous three dimensional (3-D) gels were obtained by

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mixing certain amount of GO, CeCl₃.7H₂O and propylene oxide in DMF. The metal ions react with functionalities of GO and the external addition of propylene oxide drives the gelation of metal oxide which leads to formation of a CeO₂/rGO gel at room temperature. The gelation time of CeO₂/rGO composite was found to be approximately 45 minutes. For control process, CeO₂ gel was prepared without GO by adding CeCl₃.7H₂O and propylene oxide in DMF. The gelation time of CeO₂ was found to be approximately 30 minutes. The as prepared gels were aged for a day at room temperature, washed with acetone and dried under ambient temperature and pressure to form CeO₂/rGO xerogels. The as prepared xerogels were kept in vacuum oven at 150 °C for 3 hours to remove the adsorbed solvent and moisture.

3. Characterization

The structure and morphology of the as-prepared samples were characterized by X-ray diffraction (XRD; PW3040/60 X'pert PRO (PANalytical), Cu K_{α} radiation, λ = 1.5414Å), scanning electron microscopy (Hitachi S-3000 H, 10 kV), thermogravimetric analysis (TGA; TA instrument model SDT Q600 with a heating rate of 10°C/min), and Raman spectroscopy (Renishaw Ramascope 2000 spectrometer with HeNe 632 nm laser). The electrochemical tests were carried out via the computerised potentiostat PGSTAT 30, Autolab (ECO CHEMIE Ltd., The Netherlands) driven with GPES software (Eco Chemie). A conventional three-electrode cell was used with a Ag/AgCl electrode (saturated KCl) as reference electrode, a platinum wire as counter electrode, and a bare or modified GCE (2 mm in diameter) as working electrode. Freshly prepared phosphate buffer (PB, 0.1 M, pH 7.4) solution was used as the supporting electrolyte. All electrochemical studies were performed under deaerated with high-purity nitrogen atmosphere.

3.1. Preparation of modified electrode

In order to fully understand the electrochemical behaviour of the CeO₂/rGO xerogel composite electrode, we have carefully polished the bare glassy carbon electrode to a mirror-like surface with 1.0, 0.3 and 0.05 μ m alumina slurry, respectively. It had been rinsed thoroughly with Milli-Q water after each polishing step and the electrode was allowed to dry at room temperature. To fabricate modified electrode, 1 mg of CeO₂ NPs and CeO₂/rGO xerogel composite was dispersed in 1 mL of Milli-Q water, separately. The GC electrode surface was casted with 5 μ L of this suspension and allowed to dry at room temperature for one night to fabricate CeO₂/GC and CeO₂/rGO/GC electrode, respectively. Followed by adding 10 μ L of 0.1% Nafion to this electrode and dried in air.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Structural and compositional analysis of CeO₂/reduced graphene oxide (rGO) xerogel composite

Fig. 1 shows the thermogravimetric analysis (TGA) curves for the CeO₂ xerogel and the CeO₂/rGO xerogel composites. The weight change profile of CeO₂ xerogels shows two different weight loss steps below 100 °C, between 200 to 300 °C and gets stabilized above 300 °C. The weight loss below 100 °C is attributed to the decomposition of adsorbed solvents; the weight loss step between 200 to 300 °C can be attributed to the organic substances present in the CeO₂ xerogels followed by saturation leaving their original mass (~79%). On the other hand, in CeO₂ recogels upto 300 °C but there is a sharp decrease above 300 °C which is attributed to the start of decomposition of graphene oxide which extends upto 550 °C



Fig. 1. TGA of CeO₂ and CeO₂/rGO xerogel composites.

followed by saturation leaving their original mass (~68%). The difference in weight loss of CeO2 xerogels and CeO2/rGO xerogels suggests that there is $\sim 11\%$ loading of GO in the CeO₂/rGO composites. The composite with nominal rGO weight of 10% (composite) was prepared. The samples were dried at 100 °C under vacuum and the X-ray diffraction patterns are displayed in Fig. 2. By XRD, it is evident that there is almost complete reduction of GO by the disappearance of their characteristic peak at 10.6° and formation of new peaks of CeO₂ at 28.6° (111), 33.2° (200), 47.3° (220) and 56.2° (222) in CeO₂/rGO xerogels. As prepared CeO₂/rGO xerogels were found to be nanocrystalline with cubic fluorite structure (JCPDS no. 81-0792). The crystallite size of CeO_2 in CeO_2/rGO xerogel composites (\sim 6 nm) is slightly higher than that of CeO₂ xerogels (\sim 3.6 nm) prepared without the addition of graphene oxide. The crystallite size were measured using Scherrer's formula d = $0.9 \lambda/\beta \cos\theta$. Fig. 3 shows results of SEM studies carried on CeO₂ xerogel and CeO₂/rGO xerogel composites, respectively. The SEM micrograph shows that rGO sheets are uniformly decorated with spherical CeO₂ nanoparticles. Fig. 4 displays the TEM images of CeO₂/rGO xerogel composites with uniformly decorated interconnected CeO₂ network on rGO which indicates the successful incorporation of CeO₂ onto rGO. The particle size of CeO₂ calculated from TEM images was found to be \sim 5-7 nm, which is in consistent with XRD data. The selective area diffraction (SAED) pattern obtained for CeO₂/rGO xerogel composite is also shown in Fig. 4 which suggests that CeO₂ is well decorated on rGO and polycrystalline in nature. The Raman spectra are shown



Fig. 2. XRD patterns of GO, CeO₂ and CeO₂/rGO xerogel composites.

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Fig. 3. SEM images of (a) CeO2 xerogel, and (b) CeO2/rGO xerogel composite.



Fig. 4. TEM image (left) and SAED pattern (right) of CeO₂/rGO xerogel composite.

for graphene oxide, CeO₂ xerogel and CeO₂/rGO xerogel composites in Fig. 5. From Raman spectra it is clearly evident that the D/G intensity ratio of CeO₂/rGO xerogels (~1.02) is slightly higher than that of graphene oxide (~0.92) which is attributed to restoration of sp² domains due to reduction of graphene oxide [5]. The peak at ~ 458 cm⁻¹ can be attributed to the F_{2g} bands of CeO₂ consistent with the previous reports in the literature [5]. By comparing the Raman spectra of GO and CeO₂/rGO xerogels there is a shift of raman peaks of CeO₂/rGO xerogels. There is a shift of D and G bands of rGO from 1365 and 1599 cm⁻¹ to 1335 and 1593 cm⁻¹ respectively which is in accordance with the previous report in the literature suggesting that there is effective charge transfer between the graphene sheets and CeO₂ in the CeO₂/rGO xerogels [5].

4.2. Electrochemical measurements and performance

In order to make sure the xerogel composite film is suitable for fabricating a nonenzymatic hydrogen peroxide electrochemical sensor, we have modified polished and cleaned bare GC electrode with CeO₂/rGO xerogel composite. CeO₂/GCE and rGO/GCE were also constructed for comparison. Fig. 6 shows CVs of different



Fig. 5. Raman spectra of GO, CeO_2 xerogel and CeO_2/rGO xerogel composites.

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Fig. 6. CVs of bare (a), rGO (b), CeO₂ (c), and of CeO₂/rGO xerogel composite (d) modified GCEs in N₂-saturated PB solution (0.1 M, pH 7.4) containing 3 mM H₂O₂. Inset: CVs of bare (a) rGO (b), CeO₂ (c), and of CeO₂/rGO xerogel composite (d) modified GCE in N₂-saturated pure PB solution (0.1 M, pH 7.4). Scan rate: 50 mV/s.

electrodes in N₂-saturated PB solution (0.1 M, pH 7.4) in the absence and presence of 3 mM H₂O₂. No obvious responses are observed in the absence of H₂O₂ for all the electrodes (inset curves of Fig. 6). After injecting 3 mM H₂O₂ into the PBS, no reduction peak is observed on rGO/GCE (curve b) but a capacitive behaviour or a weak reduction peak at about -0.75 V were present for CeO₂/GCE (curve c) at higher scan rate (supporting information Fig. 1S). For CeO₂/rGO/GCE, a remarkable reduction peak at about -0.70 V is observed (curve d, Fig. 6), which is 50 mV positively shifted compared with that of CeO₂/GCE. This indicates the hybrid film exhibits catalytic response characteristic of CeO₂/rGO xerogel composite.

The cyclic voltammograms of CeO₂/rGO film modified GCE in N₂-saturated PB solution in the presence of H₂O₂ with different concentrations (from 0 to 3 mM) were carried out, and the results were shown in Fig. 7(A). It is clearly seen that the H₂O₂ catalytic current gradually increases with the increase of H₂O₂ concentration. The even spacing between peak currents is indicating the possible fabrication of an electrochemical sensor which would probably behave well in the amperometric I-t experiments. Fig. 7(B) elucidates the effect of scan rate on the CVs of CeO₂/rGO xerogel composite film modified GCE in N₂-saturated PB solution containing 3 mM H₂O₂ (from 5 to 200 mV/s). The inset of Fig. 7(B) shows that the cathodic peak current is proportional to the square root of scan rate, which indicates a diffusion controlled process.

Fig. 8 illustrates the typical amperometric I-t curves of the (a) CeO₂ and (b) CeO₂/rGO xerogel composite film modified GCE on successive addition of H_2O_2 into the stirring N_2 -saturated PB solution at the applied potential of -0.3 V. As the H_2O_2 was injected into the stirring PBS, the steady-state currents reached another steady-state value (95% of the maximum) in less than 3 to 4 s. Such a fast response implies that the CeO_2 and CeO_2/rGO can promote the reduction of H₂O₂. The amperometric responses of current and mM concentration of H₂O₂ are shown in the inset of Fig. 8. The linear relationships regime for low level addition of H_2O_2 from 1 nM to 3 mM into the stirring N₂-saturated PB solution (0.1 M, pH 7.4) at -0.3 V for CeO₂ (a), and of CeO₂/rGO xerogel composite (b) modified GCEs are shown in the inset of inset of Fig. 8. As can be seen, the CeO₂/GCE displays linear response range of 91.88 μ M-2.0 mM (R² = 0.99684), with a detection limit of $31.29\,\mu\text{M}$ and for CeO_2/rGO/GCE displays linear response range of $60.70 \text{ nM}-3.0 \mu \text{M}$ (R² = 0.9956), with a detection limit of 30.40 nM at a high signal-to-noise ratio, which is comparable or lower than detection limits obtained with certain enzyme based biosensors.



Fig. 7. (A) CVs of CeO₂/rGO xerogel composite modified GCE in N₂-saturated PB solution (0.1 M, pH 7.4) containing H₂O₂ in different concentrations. Scan rate: 50 mV/s. (B) CVs of CeO₂/rGO xerogel composite modified GCE in N₂-saturated PB solution (0.1 M, pH 7.4) in the presence of 3 mM H₂O₂ at different scan rates. The linear dependence of peak current with the square root of scan rate was shown in the inset.



Fig. 8. Amperometric responses of CeO₂ (a), and of CeO₂/rGO xerogels (b) modified GCEs on successive mM addition of H₂O₂ into the stirring N₂-saturated PB solution (0.1 M, pH 7.4) at -0.30 V. Inset: the amperometric responses of current and mM concentration of H₂O₂ and the inset of inset implies the linear relationships between the catalytic current and the concentration for amperometric responses of CeO₂ (a), and of CeO₂/rGO xerogels (b) modified GCEs on successive from nM to μ M addition of H₂O₂.

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Table 1

Comparison of CeO₂ and its composite based H₂O₂ sensors and some other enzymatic H₂O₂ sensors.

Electrode materials	Sensitivity	Linear range	Detection limit	References (Working Potential/V)
CeO ₂ /rGO/GC	$1.978\times 10^{-4}~\mu\text{A}/\mu\text{M}$	60.70 nM–3.0 μM	30.40 nM	Present work (-0.3)
CeO ₂ /GC	$2.9346 \times 10^{-5} \mu\text{A/mM}$	91.88 μM-2.0 mM	31.29 μM	Present work (-0.3)
HRP/CeO ₂ /ITO	$0.0084 \mu A/(\mu M cm^2)$	1.0 μM-170 μM	0.5 μM	[18] (-0.3)
HRP/Au/CeO2-CS/GC		50 μM-2500 μM	7.0 µM	[21] (-0.4)
HRP/CeO ₂ /CS/GC		1.0 μM-150 μM	0.26 μΜ	[22] (-0.348)
HRP-ADA/pCDSH/Au	109 μA/Mcm ²	28.8 μM-5.5 mM	7.0 μM	[36] (-0.3)
Mb-HSG-SN-CNTs/GCE		2.0 μM-1.2 mM	0.36 µM	[37] (-0.45)
HRP-ADA/CD-GR/GC	783.4 mA/Mcm ²	0.7 μM-35 μM	0.1 µM	[38] (-0.15)
HRP-ADA/β-CD/Au	1.02 mA/Mcm ²	12.0 μM-450 μM	5.0 µM	[39] (-0.25)
HRP/Au via Ugi-4CR	33.8 mA/Mcm ²	70 µM-8.8 mM	20.0 μM	[40] (-0.3)
HRP/polyAuNP/Au	498 μA/Mcm ²	5 µM-1.1 mM	1.5 µM	[41] (0.0)
CD-PAMAM D3/HRP3/Au	602 µA/Mcm ²	0.5 μM–186 μM	160 nM	[42] (-0.1)
HRP3-ADA/CMC/pCD/Au	720 μA/Mcm ²	100 μM-3.9 mM	2.0 μM	[43] (-0.05)
HRP/Fc-CS/GC	$28.4\times10^{-3}\;\mu\text{A}/M$	35 µM-2.0 mM	15.0 μM	[44] (+0.15)

The reproducibility of the sensor was also investigated and the relative standard deviation (RSD) for H_2O_2 sensing was less than 2% for 5 measurements for the same electrode. We have summarized only CeO₂ and its composite based H_2O_2 sensors and some other enzymatic hydrogen peroxide sensors in Table 1 with respect to the sensitivity, linear range, detection limit and working potential.

5. Conclusions

A porous three dimensional CeO₂/rGO xerogel composite were synthesized via sol-gel method containing a small amount of rGO. A low level detection of hydrogen peroxide reduction, based on CeO₂/rGO xerogel composite was fabricated. The electrochemical behaviors were investigated by CV and amperometric (I-t) techniques. The fabricated nonenzymatic electrochemical sensor was fast, stable and reliable with the detection limit of 30.40 nM for CeO₂/rGO/GC modified electrode. The well-performed electrochemical response should be ascribed to the enlarged surface area contributed by the CeO₂/rGO xerogel composite with porous 3D architecture. This preparation provides a novel route for synthesizing hybrid nanomaterials based on porous three dimensional (3D) graphene xerogels. These hybrid nanomaterials may also give an excellent response for other chemical or biological determinations.

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