TITLE:
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CITATION:
Nakayama, Yosuke ...[et al]. Electrocatalytic oxidation of water observed on a nano-gold/palladium electrode. Chemical communications 2013, 49(45): 5228-5230

ISSUE DATE:
2013-06-07

URL:
http://hdl.handle.net/2433/190493

RIGHT:
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Electrocatalytic oxidation of water observed on a nano-gold/palladium electrode

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Received (in XXX, XXX) Xth XXXXXXXXX 20XX, Accepted Xth XXXXXXXXX 20XX
DOI: 10.1039/c0xx00000x

A new and unknown electrocatalytic oxidation of water was found to occur on a nano-gold attached palladium electrode. Since the oxidation potential was negative enough to that of a well-known normal oxidation of water to form O₂, the direct use of water as a fuel, instead of alcohols, might be possible using the nano-gold/palladium electrode.

Direct alcohol fuel cells (DAFCs) have been attracting considerable interest in recent years as summarized in several reviews. While direct methanol fuel cells (DMFCs) with platinum-related electrocatalysts have been extensively studied, one of the recent concerns would be direct alkaline alcohol fuel cells (DAAFCs), in particular, with palladium-based electrocatalysts. In this case, ethanol can be used as an alternative fuel due to the less toxic and green characteristics, as direct ethanol fuel cells (DEFCs).

As for the fuels, while there is a tremendous number of reports using methanol, ethanol, ethylene glycol, etc., there is no report that water shows similar electrocatalytic oxidation reactions, to the best of our knowledge. This is quite natural because specific oxidation of water was not expected at the potential region where methanol or ethanol is oxidized in alkaline solutions, so that water has been used as the solvent in DAFCs. However, we have found that the electrocatalytic oxidation of water does occur with a gold-nanoparticle-attached palladium (nano-Au/Pd) electrode. Thus, in this communication, the phenomenon is shown for the first time.

The preparation of a nano-Au/Pd electrode is very simple. At first, an aqueous solution of gold nanoparticles (AuNPs), whose diameter was ca. 3.5 nm, was prepared according to the reported procedures. Into the solution of 3.5-nm AuNPs, a commercially available Pd disk (diam. 1.6 mm) electrode (BAS Inc.) was immersed and suspended for 2 hours after polishing the surface. Since the small AuNPs can physisorb on surfaces just by immersion, the AuNPs can be attached on the surface of the Pd disk electrode. After the modification, the surface of the nano-Au/Pd electrode was washed with water.

Cyclic voltamograms (CVs) were recorded in alkaline solutions with an unmodified Pd disk electrode and a AuNP-attached Pd disk (i.e., nano-Au/Pd) electrode without degassing. In an aqueous solution containing 1.0 M NaOH, interestingly the open circuit potential (OCP) was significantly different; it was ca. -0.10 V (vs. Ag/AgCl) with the Pd electrode and ca. -0.90 V with the nano-Au/Pd electrode. Hence, we recorded the CVs in Fig. 1 as the result of the positive going scans from the OCP to 0.2 V, followed by the negative going scan to -1.1 V and again to the OCP. As a remarkable characteristic of the results, a steep increase of the oxidation current was observed at -0.09 V (vs. Ag/AgCl) with the nano-Au/Pd electrode (Fig. 1A). The current increase was quite significant in comparison with the cyclic voltammogram recorded with the normal Pd electrode (Fig. 1B). This means the attached small AuNPs allowed a huge increase of the oxidation current in 1.0 M NaOH aqueous solution. While the electrochemical responses as in Fig. 1B have been reported with Pd bulk electrodes in alkaline media, there is no report of the CV as in Fig. 1A, to the best of our knowledge.

A similar unknown increase of the oxidation current was observed in acidic and neutral solutions. Fig. 2 shows the CVs recorded in 0.5 M H₂SO₄ aqueous solution. The significant current increase was observed overlapping with the oxidation of Pd and the reduction of Pd oxides, both of which appeared in Fig. 3A and B as a peak. In this case also, the onset potential of the increased current was negative enough to that of the oxidation of Pd. However, the response as shown in Fig. 1 was observed only in the alkaline solutions, and the current magnitude was smaller in the acidic H₂SO₄ and the neutral KCl or phosphate buffer solutions.

![Fig. 1: Cyclic voltammograms recorded in 1.0 M NaOH aqueous solution with (A) a nano-Au/Pd electrode and (B) a Pd electrode. Scan rate: 50 mVs⁻¹. Each scan was started from the open circuit potential (+).](https://repository.kulib.kyoto-u.ac.jp)
To make clear the source of oxidative response in Fig. 1A, we recorded CVs for (i) 1.0 M NaOH + 1.0 M methanol and (ii) 1.0 M NaOH + 1.0 M ethanol aqueous solutions with the Pd and nano-Au/Pd electrode (Fig. 3). As the result, while electrocatalytic responses were confirmed with the Pd electrode for both (i) and (ii), the results of the initial potential scans with the nano-Au/Pd electrode for (i) and (ii) were quite similar to the response in Fig. 1A having increased oxidation currents. Thus, the electrochemical response is expected to come from the solvent, i.e., water, not from the solutes.

As for the electrocatalytic response of ethanol on Pd, it has been established that the rate determining step is the interaction between the absorbed species, OH$_{ads}$ and CH$_3$COads. The eliminative desorption of CH$_3$COOH to bring about free Pd sites to allow the electrocatalytic oxidation of ethanol. With referring this mechanism and considering the present unique phenomena only observed on the surface of nano-Au/Pd for water, the elimination of the surface adsorbed species, OH$_{ads}$, at the nano-Au/Pd boundary would be inferred to be a key to enhance the oxidation current of water. As shown in the scheme, the formation of OH$_{ads}$ would be possible both on Pd and Au in the present electrode. If the elimination of H$_2$O$_2$ occurs on the nano-Au/Pd, the catalytic enhancement of the oxidation current should be expected by a simple mechanism.
of methanol and ethanol in aqueous solutions (see Fig. 3). This indicates a possibility that water can be used as a fuel in the anodic (fuel) reaction of direct fuel cells if we choose specific electrode materials. Of course, the cathodic (air) reaction is a reversible reaction of the normal oxidation of water to form O₂, so that the normal oxidation of water cannot give energy differences. However, the present CV results have shown that the specific electrocatalytic oxidation occur at negative potentials and can lead to a new design of direct fuel cells with the electrocatalytic oxidation of water as the anodic reaction instead of alcohol fuels. In this “direct water fuel cells”, the huge merit is that water fuel can be used as is, though normally it needs to be split into H₂ or the alternative alcohols or others need to be used as fuels.

The present results are preliminary ones. As a difficult point in the CV measurements at present, the values of the maximum oxidation current around -0.09 V were not constant, but varied in some experiments even when we prepared several Pd electrodes using the identical AuNPs’ solution. This might be due to some variation of the attached amount of AuNPs. For this point, some further works would be necessary. Also, for more practical views, we confirmed the stability of AuNPs on Pd by the repeated CV and chronoamperometric measurements. As the result, the peak potential shifted to the negative potential as in Fig. 4, and the magnitude of the current was decreased in the second and the third scans. However, after the measurements of repeated CVs or chronoamperometry for several minutes at positive potentials, e.g., 0.3V, the electrochemical response was recovered to show the CV similar to that of the second scan. So, we believe neither significant removal nor passivation occur for AuNPs during the measurements. However, the results of the first scan were observed only in the initial uses after the modification, so that the further mechanistic studies would be necessary on this point.

The present result was obtained using the nano-Au/Pd electrode, so that further designs of the nano-Au/Pd electrodes should be necessary for constructing actual “direct water fuel cells”. If the bulk characteristics of Pd are essential for the present electrocatalytic oxidation of water in combining with AuNPs, the cost and availability of Pd might be a problem over the merits of water as the fuel. However, the same electrocatalytic oxidation of water might be possible on other metal-nanocomposites, and, if so, it would be possible to obtain electricity from water and air without emitting CO₂. So, we believe that the revealed presence of the new electrocatalytic reaction of water may lead to a new paradigm of direct fuel cells.

Notes and references

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Fig. 3 Cyclic voltammograms recorded 1.0 M NaOH aqueous solution with a nano-Au/Pd electrode. The result of (A) first scan, (B) second scan, (C) third scan. Scan rate; 50 mVs⁻¹.