Chemical synthesis of highly size-confined triethylamine-capped TiO₂ nanoparticles and its dye-sensitized solar cell performance

T PRAKASH1,* M NAVANEETHAN2, J ARCHANA3, S PONNUSAMY4, C MUTHAMIZCHELVAN4 and Y HAYAKAWA2
1Department of S & H, QIS Institute of Technology, Ongole, Prakasam 523 272, India
2Research Institute of Electronics, Shizuoka University, 3-5-1 Johoku, Naka-ku, Hamamatsu, Shizuoka 432-8011, Japan
3SRM Research Institute, Department of Physics & Nanotechnology, SRM University, Kattankulathur, Kancheepuram 603203, India
4Department of Physics & Nanotechnology, SRM University, Kattankulathur, Kancheepuram 603203, India
*Author for correspondence (t.prakash.phy@gmail.com)

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Abstract. TiO₂ nanoparticles were synthesized by a facile wet chemical synthesis using triethylamine (TEA) as a surface passivating agent. The role of TEA on the formation and functional properties of TiO₂ nanoparticles were investigated. Particle agglomeration was restricted and nanoparticle size was limited to 5 nm by passivating the amine molecule. Photoanodes were fabricated by spray deposition method using synthesized TiO₂ nanoparticles. The efficiency of 5.91% was obtained by the dye-sensitized solar cells.

Keywords. Nanostructures; semiconductors; chemical synthesis; electron microscopy.

1. Introduction

The physical and chemical properties of TiO₂ are dependent on their size, morphology and crystal structure. Titanium dioxide exists in three crystalline forms: anatase, rutile and brookite. Among these, anatase is considered as one of the most promising phase for photocatalysis and solar energy conversion applications, because of their least recombination rate [1,2]. It is well known that dimensionality (nanorods, nanowires, nanotubes, etc.) and crystalline quality of the anatase TiO₂ nanostructures have played an important role in the dye-sensitized solar cells (DSSCs) to achieve the higher conversion efficiency [3–5]. Several methods were developed to synthesize TiO₂ nanostructures such as micelle and inverse micelle methods, direct oxidation method, chemical vapour deposition, physical vapour deposition, electrodeposition, sonochemical method, microwave method and wet chemical method [26].

Among these, wet chemical method is found to be the easiest and promising method for the preparation of TiO₂ nanoparticles due to their simplicity, low cost and possibility of large scale synthesis [6–9]. Till now, a few research works were reported on the synthesis of size-confined TiO₂ nanoparticles using an organic ligand as capping agent. For example, Wang et al [10] grew hexylamine-capped TiO₂ nanoparticles with an average size of 3.9 nm. Kim et al [11] synthesized oleic acid-capped TiO₂ nanoparticles with an average size of 3–5 nm. Wu et al [12] synthesized stearic acid-capped TiO₂ nanoparticles with an average size of 6–8 nm by sol–gel method and Misra and Liu [13] reported resorcinarene-capped TiO₂ nanoparticles with an average size of 5 nm by a wet chemical method. Recently, amine molecules were attracted as a capping agent to the synthesis of size-confined oxide nanocrystals owing to their chemisorption nature, which exists by virtue of their lone pair electrons on the nitrogen atoms [14].

In the previous reports, triethylamine (TEA) was used as a capping ligand for the synthesis of monodispersed CdS and PbS nanoparticles with a smaller size [15,16]. Hence, TEA was selected as a capping agent to synthesize the size-confined TiO₂ nanoparticles using wet chemical process. In the present research, we report a facile synthesis of highly size-confined anatase TiO₂ nanoparticles using titanium (IV) isopropoxide (TIP) solution as a titania source and TEA as a capping agent. The functional properties and DSSCs performance were studied.

2. Materials and methods

2.1 Preparation of anatase TiO₂ nanoparticles

All the chemicals were purchased from Wako chemicals (Japan) and used without further purification. The synthesis of TiO₂ nanoparticles as follows: 0.5 ml TEA was added slowly to 40 ml ethanol under vigorous stirring for 5 min at room temperature. A white precipitate was obtained, while drop-wise addition of 4 ml titanium isopropoxide (TIP) into
the parent solution under vigorous stirring (490 rpm) at room temperature, and the final ratio of TIP, TEA and ethanol was 4:0.5:40. After 12 h, the precipitates were separated by centrifugation and washed with water for several times. Finally, a precipitate was dried at 100°C for 12 h using hot air oven and stored at room temperature for further studies. The uncapped TiO₂ particles were synthesized by the method used for TEA-capped TiO₂ nanoparticles without using TEA. TEA-capped and uncapped TiO₂ nanoparticles were marked as S1 and S2, respectively.

2.2 Solar cell fabrication

Two grams of TiO₂ nanoparticles and 50 ml ethanol were grounded in a mortar for a few minutes to form colloidal suspensions. Thereafter, five drops of triton-X were added into the solution as an organic binder. Fluorine-doped tin oxide (FTO) substrates were cleaned ultrasonically using a mixture of acetone and ethanol for 30 min at room temperature. To fabricate the photoanode, TiO₂ nanoparticles suspension in ethanolic solution was sprayed over the FTO substrate at a substrate temperature of 150°C by spray-deposition method and annealed at 530°C for 2 h. Photoanodes were immersed in ethanolic solution with 0.03 M di-tetrabutylammonium cis-bis(isothiocyanato)bis(2,2′′-bipyridyl-4,4′-dicarboxylato) ruthenium (II) (N-719). The dye-sensitized photoanode and Pt-coated counter electrode were clamped using clips. Finally, an iodide-based redox electrolyte was filled between the electrodes via capillary action.

2.3 Characterization of anatase TiO₂

Powder XRD patterns were recorded using a Rigaku (Japan) X-ray diffractometer (XRD) (RINT-2200) with CuKα radiation at 0.02° s⁻¹ step interval. Fourier transform infrared (FTIR) spectra were obtained from JEOL JIR-WINSPEC 50 spectrometer. UV–visible absorption analyses were performed using a Shimadzu (Japan) 3100 PC spectrophotometer with ethanol as dispersing medium. Raman spectra were obtained using a JASCO NR 1800 Raman spectrophotometer equipped with Nd:YAG laser. Field emission scanning electron microscope (FESEM) images were recorded using a JEOL JSM 6320F. Transmission electron microscope (TEM) images were recorded using a JEOL JEM 2100F at an accelerating voltage of 200 kV.
3. Results and discussion

The phase purity of the synthesized products was identified by powered XRD measurement. Powder XRD patterns were recorded for TEA-capped and uncapped TiO$_2$ nanoparticles as shown in figure 1. All the observed diffraction peaks were indexed as anatase crystal structure of TiO$_2$ (JCPDS 89-4921) for TEA-capped TiO$_2$ nanoparticles [17–19]. But, detectable diffraction peaks were not observed in uncapped TiO$_2$ nanoparticles, which indicate the amorphous nature of the sample. The amorphous nature of uncapped TiO$_2$ nanoparticles is due to the formation of hydrated TiO$_2$. Highly crystalline and anatase phase TiO$_2$ nanoparticles were formed by the addition of TEA into the ethanol solution of titanium isopropoxide results from large coordination bonding of TEA ligands sitting on Ti atoms. The uncapped TiO$_2$ particles were synthesized using same preparation procedure without using TEA. If stirred for overnight, then we can get nanoparticles. But reaction parameter might be changed, hence, maintained same reaction time.

Raman spectra were recorded to investigate the crystalline phase purity of the synthesized products as represented in figure 2. The Raman spectrum of uncapped sample (S2) does not show any clear spectral peak, which represents the formation of amorphous hydrated TiO$_2$ nanoparticles. On the contrary, TEA-capped TiO$_2$ nanoparticles (S1 shows the bands at 150 cm$^{-1}$ (very strong), 402 cm$^{-1}$ (weak), 517 cm$^{-1}$ (weak) and 640 cm$^{-1}$ (medium). The bands observed at 150 cm$^{-1}$ ($E_g$), 402 cm$^{-1}$ ($B_{1g}$), 517 cm$^{-1}$ ($A_{1g} + B_{1g}$) and 640 cm$^{-1}$ ($E_g$) were consistent with the bands observed from the previous report for anatase TiO$_2$ [20–22].

UV–visible absorption spectra of uncapped (S2) and TEA-capped (S1) TiO$_2$ nanoparticles are illustrated in figure 3. The absorption edges of the uncapped (S2) and TEA-capped (S1) nanoparticles were 360 and 336 nm, respectively, and exhibited a blue shift from 360 to 336 nm arises from particle size reduction [23]. The surface capping of the TiO$_2$

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**Figure 4.** FTIR spectra of TEA-capped (S1) and uncapped (S2) TiO$_2$ nanoparticles.

**Figure 5.** Formation mechanism of TEA-capped and uncapped TiO$_2$ nanoparticles.
Figure 6. (a) FESEM images of uncapped TiO$_2$ nanoparticles, (b and c) TEM images of TEA-capped TiO$_2$ nanoparticles, (d and e) the top and cross-sectional view of annealed photoanode of sample S2.

Figure 7. $I-V$ curve of TEA-capped TiO$_2$ nanoparticles.

nanoparticles by TEA was confirmed by FTIR studies. Figure 4 shows the FTIR spectra of uncapped (S2) and TEA-capped (S1) TiO$_2$ nanoparticles. The peak at 1040 cm$^{-1}$ attributed to C–N stretching vibration of TEA molecule. The peaks at 1128, 1367 and 1632 cm$^{-1}$ corresponded to N–H vibrations of TEA molecule [24]. It clearly demonstrated the surface capping of TEA molecule on the surface of TiO$_2$ nanoparticles.

The schematic representation to the formation of TiO$_2$ nanoparticles is shown in figure 5. Formation of TEA-capped TiO$_2$ nanoparticle is as follows: lone pair of electrons in the nitrogen atom of TEA was attached to the surface of the TiO$_2$ nanoparticles due to the affinity of the nitrogen with Ti$^{4+}$. The nitrogen atom forms a coordinate bond with the surface of TiO$_2$, because of its chemisorption properties. In addition to that the longer stirring time and alcoholysis of TEA in the ethanol brings the formation of nanoparticles.

FESEM image of uncapped TiO$_2$ shows the spherical shape with an agglomeration in the range of 2 μm (figure 6a). TEM image of TEA-capped TiO$_2$ nanoparticles presented in figure 6b, a spherical shape was observed with an average size of 5 nm. The clear distinguished lattice fringes were observed from HRTEM images represent a high crystalline quality of the nanoparticles (figure 6c). Photoanode was prepared by using spray pyrolysis technique for TEA-capped TiO$_2$ nanoparticles. The top and cross-sectional FESEM views of the photoanode are shown in figure 6d and e, respectively. Clearly, they show that the pores adsorb enough dye molecules on the TiO$_2$ nanoparticles. DSSCs works under a complicated system involving several processes such as light absorption, charge separation and injection, transport of injected electron and electrolyte diffusion. The charge collection and electron transport in DSSCs are highly dependent on the morphology, surface area, porosity and size of TiO$_2$.

DSSCs were fabricated using nanocrystalline TiO$_2$ particles. However, 5.91% conversion efficiency, with the open
circuit photovoltage of 780 mV, the shortcircuit photocurrent of 11.15 mA cm\(^{-2}\) and the fill factor 0.75, were obtained with the nanocrystalline TiO\(_2\) film of 20 \(\mu\)m in thickness fabricated at 530°C (figure 7). However, higher efficiency is difficult to be achieved with only the nanocrystalline TiO\(_2\) film composed of these very small nanoparticles and the sensitizer dye of N719 due to the low light harvest in the red region. It is suggested that the TiO\(_2\) photoelectrode morphology, nanoparticles, mixture of nanoparticles and light-scattering particles on the conductive glass at a desirable sequence and thickness, is essential and necessary for high efficiency [25]. However, the small nanocrystals adsorbed much more sensitizer will be a notable item for improvement of DSSC performance. With N719 dye, it is very easy to get efficiency of \(\sim\)7–9% when focussed only on the efficiency. But their way of preparation is also important. Synthesizing nanoparticles with some different techniques requires high-cost equipments. But in this research work, TiO\(_2\) nanoparticles were synthesized by simple preparation procedure with low-cost equipments. Already published research work was carried out by hydrothermal method. In this research work, synthesized TEA-capped TiO\(_2\) nanoparticles were prepared by using simple chemical preparation procedure.

4. Conclusions

We have clearly demonstrated the synthesis of TiO\(_2\) nanoparticles at room temperature with the use of TEA as a capping ligand. Fabrication of photoanode can be easily achieved by using the spray deposition method. XRD and Raman studies confirm the formation of anatase TiO\(_2\) nanoparticles. TEM and HRTEM reveal the size confinement of TiO\(_2\) nanoparticles with an average size of 5 nm. FTIR spectra confirmed the surface passivation of TEA on TiO\(_2\). This low-cost synthesis method shows good performance and successfully attributed to the control growth of TiO\(_2\) nanoparticles with tuning the size.

References