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Study about the morphology effect on the photo-efficiency of WO₃

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Abstract

The photocatalytic activity of hexagonal (h-) WO₃ nanoparticles (NPs) and nanowires (NWs) was investigated and compared with the performance of monoclinic (m-) WO₃ nanoparticles in the aqueous photo-bleaching reaction of methyl orange (MO) under UV irradiation. It has been known that the m-WO₃ is better photocatalyst than the h-WO₃, but due to the advantageous morphology we investigated whether the h-WO₃ NWs can reach the photo-efficiency of the m-WO₃ NPs. The h-WO₃ was successfully synthesized in NW and NP morphology using a microwave (MW) assisted hydrothermal procedure starting from Na₂WO₄ and thermal annealing of hexagonal ammonium tungsten bronze, (NH₄)_{0.33-x}WO₃, respectively. We found that the h-WO₃ NWs exhibited almost three times higher photoactivity than the h-WO₃ NPs. The improved performance of the NWs can be attributed to the enlarged surface area and the good charge carrier ability of the nanowire morphology. The catalytic tests also confirmed that the morphological effect could lead to as high photoactivity in the case of h-WO₃ NWs as exhibited by the m-WO₃ NPs.

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1. Background and objectives

In the last few decades much attention has been attracted to alternative energy resources including renewable and nuclear fusion energy due to the limitation of fossil fuel availability on the Earth. Exploring solar light is one of the highly studied possibilities for future energy as it can provide environmental friendly and renewable source of energy. Photocatalysts are able to convert solar energy into chemical energy which can be used for numerous purposes like generation of hydrogen fuel through water splitting; purification of different aqueous media; green synthesis of various chemicals. [1]

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TiO₂ was historically the first photocatalyst and still remained one of the most efficient photocatalysts under UV light. However, the large band gap energy of TiO₂ makes its application in solar photocatalysis insufficient. An option to develop solar sensitive photocatalyst is to couple TiO₂ with other semiconductors, which absorb in the Vis range. As a beneficial consequence of making composites with TiO₂, delayed recombination of the photo-generated charges can be provided. The electrons and holes can be effectively separated in the different semiconductor layers resulting in higher photo-efficiency. Narrow band gap semiconductors like WO₃, V₂O₅, Bi₂O₃ are usually considered to form a heterojunction with TiO₂. [2-4]

WO₃ attracted much attention recently, owing to its broad application prospective and advantageous chemical and electrical properties. [4, 5] WO₃ is a good candidate for the fabrication of solar response photocatalyst with TiO₂ as it has absorption in the Vis range. [6] The photocatalytic activity depends on many factors, and numerous attempts were made in order to control the size distribution and the dimensionality of the nanocatalysts, because these are considered key parameters in affecting their photocatalytic performance. [7-10] Various morphologies were already achieved including nanotrees, nanorods, nanospheres etc. [9, 11, 12] Unexpectedly, it was recently reported that despite their high specific surface area in some cases certain WO₃ particles showed lower photo-efficiency. [13] The peculiar finding was accounted for the facilitated charge recombination which surpassed the positive effect of the enlarged surface area. It is also known that the crystalline phase and the composition of WO₃ play an important role in the photo-efficiency. It was revealed that usually m-WO₃ possesses better photocatalytic ability than h-WO₃. [14]

Considering these factors in this study we aimed to investigate the overall effect of the morphology on the photocatalytic performance of different polymorphs of WO₃, with the pronounced future objective to fabricate solar active nanocomposites by coupling WO₃ polymorphs with TiO₂.

2. Experimental

H-WO₃ NPs were prepared by thermal annealing of hexagonal ammonium tungsten bronze, (NH₄)_{0.33-x}WO₃ at 470 °C in air. [15] H-WO₃ NWs were obtained in a microwave assisted hydrothermal synthesis at 160 °C. [5] The reaction mixture was prepared from sodium tungstate dihydrate (Na₂WO₄·2H₂O), ammonium sulphate ((NH₄)₂SO₄), HCl and distilled water followed by the MW process in a Synthos 3000 Anton Paar reactor. After the synthesis the nanocrystals were centrifuged, washed with water and ethanol and finally dried at 80 °C for 24 h. For the preparation of the m-WO₃ NPs, (NH₄)_{0.33-x}WO₃ was annealed at 600 °C in air. [15]

The morphology of the as-prepared catalysts was investigated by TEM, and the images were collected by a FEI Morgagni 268D instrument. The determination of the crystalline phase of the WO₃ photocatalysts was performed by recording Raman spectra. A Jobin-Yvon Labram type Raman spectrometer coupled with an Olympus BX-41 microscope was used. Nd-YAG laser with a wavelength of 532 nm was applied as a light source in the Raman spectrometer. The specific surface area was determined by applying the BET model based on the absorption isotherm of nitrogen at 77 K using a NOVA 2000E equipment (Quantachrome, USA).

The photocatalytic activity was measured in aqueous methyl orange (MO) (10 mg/350 ml) solution under UV irradiation. In a typical test 100 mg catalyst powder was suspended in the MO solution. The photo-reactor was a cylindrical glass reactor equipped with a Heraeus TQ 150 mercury immersion lamp. The solution was stirred and oxygen bubbling was provided. Room temperature was maintained by circulating cold water in the jacket of the photo-reactor. The concentration of MO was followed by a Jasco V-550 type UV-Vis spectrophotometer at 465 nm.

3. Results and discussion

The morphology of the nanostructures was confirmed by TEM (see in Fig. 1.). The images revealed that the h-WO₃ NWs had diameters between 5 and 10 nm and were several hundred nm long. The h-WO₃ NPs consisted of 50-70 nm particles, while the m-WO₃ NPs were made up by 60-90 nm particles.

The BET specific surface area of the h-WO₃ NP and NW was found to be 11 m²g⁻¹ and 101 m²g⁻¹, respectively. The nanowire morphology resulted in one order of magnitude higher specific surface area, compared to that of the nanoparticle. [14]

The Raman spectra were in good agreement with the literature data and confirmed the hexagonal and monoclinic crystalline phase of the certain WO₃ nanostructures. [14]

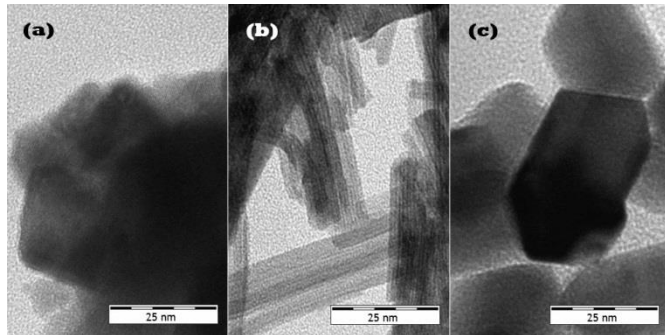


Fig. 1. TEM images of (a) h-WO₃ NPs; (b) h-WO₃ NWs; (c) m-WO₃ NPs

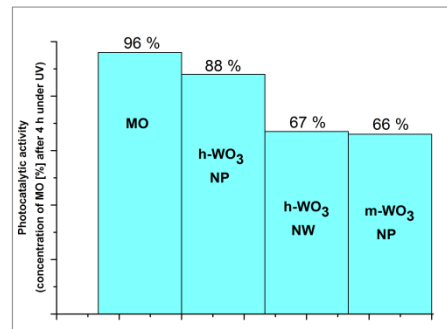


Fig. 2. MO concentrations given in percentage after 4 hour UV irradiation in the photocatalytic test reaction

In the photocatalytic test we found that the h-WO₃ NWs were almost three times more effective in the degradation of MO than h-WO₃ NPs (see Fig. 2.). By the end of the 4 hour UV irradiation 12 % of the initial MO was decomposed by the h-WO₃ NPs, while the h-WO₃ NWs photo-bleached 33% of the original concentration of MO. The remarkable improvement in the photocatalytic activity could be attributed to the beneficial morphology of the h-WO₃ NWs. The findings also confirmed how important the precise control is over the morphology. The nanowire structure can provide better carrier transport to the separated charges and possess higher specific surface area leading to triple efficiency. The performance of h-WO₃ NWs was compared with the activity of m-WO₃ NPs as well. It was concluded that by the end of the photocatalytic test the h-WO₃ NWs were even more efficient (34 % MO decomposed) than the nanoparticles of the inherently better photocatalyst m-WO₃ (33 % MO decomposed). This finding revealed that the h-WO₃, which attracted much interest due to its unique open-tunnel structure, can also achieve similarly high photon efficiency as m-WO₃.

4. Conclusions

In this study we successfully synthesized h-WO₃ both with NW and NP morphology along with m-WO₃ with NP nanostructure, either by a MW assisted hydrothermal synthesis route or by annealing (NH₄)_{0.33-x}WO₃. The crystal phase of the nanostructures was confirmed by Raman spectroscopy while the microstructures were investigated by TEM. The morphological effect on the photo-efficiency of the as-prepared h- and m-WO₃ nanostructures was elucidated. The photoactivity of the h-WO₃ NWs was higher almost three times higher compared to the performance of the h-WO₃ NPs. The significant improvement in the photo-efficiency clearly indicated the positive effect of the high aspect ratio of the NWs, which

could provide more enhanced carrier transport in the photocatalytic reaction than the NP nanostructure. It was also studied whether the h-WO₃ NWs can exhibit as high photoactivity as the m-WO₃ NPs, which have been otherwise considered to be better photocatalysts. It was found that by the end of the degradation test the h-WO₃ NWs surpassed even the performance of m-WO₃ NPs to some extent.

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