



Short communication

## Free chlorine detection based on EC' mechanism at an electroactive polymelamine-modified electrode



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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 30 April 2014

Received in revised form 19 June 2014

Accepted 19 June 2014

Available online 28 June 2014

## Keywords:

Polymelamine

Hypochlorite

Free chlorine

Screen printed carbon electrode

## ABSTRACT

This work presents the application of an electroactive polymelamine-modified screen printed carbon electrode (polymelamine-SPCE) for free chlorine (free-Cl) detection. It is based on EC' mechanism for electrocatalytic detection of free-Cl with the azo (i.e.,  $-N=N-$ ) functionality of polymelamine first reduced electrochemically followed by oxidization with free-Cl in a cyclic manner. The polymelamine-SPCE showed a wide linear range from 10  $\mu$ M to 7 mM ( $R^2 = 0.9957$ ) and a detection limit of 5.5  $\mu$ M ( $S/N = 3$ ) for free-Cl detection by flow injection analysis in neutral media. It was successfully demonstrated for the determination of free-Cl in swimming pool and tap waters.

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## 1. Introduction

Free-Cl (commercially available as hypochlorite in alkaline solution) is used as disinfectant and deodorizer to destroy disease-causing bacteria and extensively employed in everyday life ranging from household bleaching, disinfection of drinking water and swimming pool water, hospitals, to industries in effluent treatment [1–4]. Free-Cl concentration (the sum of dissolved chlorine gas ( $Cl_2$ ), hypochlorous acid (HOCl) and hypochlorite ion ( $ClO^-$ ) depending on the pH of the medium [5]) is of special importance to define levels of the quality of disinfection and thus proper control and monitor of free-Cl is necessary [6]. Its determination is normally carried out by means of the *N,N*-diethyl-*p*-phenylenediamine (DPD) colorimetric method [7]. Nonetheless, the DPD method cannot be applied in continuous systems. The development of autonomous analytical systems to overcome the drawback for free-Cl monitoring is therefore of high interest.

Compared to various methods employed for free-Cl determination [8–10], electroanalytical method is simple to apply in continuous monitoring. Unfortunately, the reported electrodes for the determination of free-Cl at cathodic potential are too complicated and expensive [11–14]. The reduction potential for free-Cl is also close to dissolved oxygen reduction potential that makes the detection difficult [15]. As to the anodic determination of free-Cl, deterioration of electrodes to result in fouling of the electrode remains a problem. This would then require pre-treatment of the electrodes which renders the method unsuitable for continuous on-line monitoring. Boron-doped diamond (BDD) electrodes were reported to solve the problem for determining the

concentration of free-Cl [16]. Yet, the use of disposable screen printed carbon electrode (SPCE) obviously can make the analytical work more convenient in real field application [17].

Recently, our group has reported the background of an electroactive polymelamine with the azo and hydrazo functionality [18]. The formation of azo functionality by hypochlorite (free-Cl) has been reported to involve in the oxidation of hydrazo (i.e.,  $-NH-NH-$ ) functionality with certain selectivity in fluorescent sensor [19,20]. It is interesting that this specific reaction is also true at the polymelamine-SPCE with the hydrazo functional group to selectively react with hypochlorite (free-Cl). We present here our effort in developing this disposable sensor for the determination of free-Cl in swimming pool and tap waters.

## 2. Materials and methods

Hypochlorite (12%) was purchased from SHOWA. Melamine was obtained from Sigma-Aldrich and all other compounds were of analytical grade and used without purification. Aqueous solutions were prepared with double distilled water. For all experiments, the SPCE (geometric area = 0.196  $cm^2$ ) obtained from Zensor R&D (Taichung, Taiwan) was preanodized by applying a potential of 2.0 V for 300 s in 0.1 M, pH 7 PBS. Electropolymerization was done by cycling between 0.2 and 1.5 V in 0.1 M HCl containing 1 mM melamine for 20 segments [18,21]. As free-Cl easily undergoes auto-decomposition, 1% free-Cl (i.e., 1% (v/v) hypochlorite) solution was freshly prepared from 12% hypochlorite solution and determined its concentration spectrophotometrically (Model U 3000, Hitachi, Japan) at 294 nm before use [22].

Electrochemical experiments were carried out with a CHI 832 electrochemical workstation (CH instruments, Austin, TX) using the polymelamine-SPCE working, Ag/AgCl reference, and platinum auxiliary

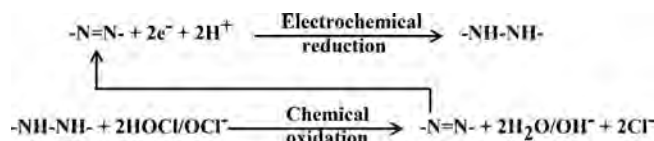
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electrodes. The dynamic amperometric experiments were carried out at a FIA system as reported earlier with a 0.1 M, pH 7 PBS carrier solution [23]. The AFM images were recorded with a multimode scanning probe microscope system operated in tapping mode using Being Nano-Instruments CSPM-4000 (Ben Yuan Ltd., China). Swimming pool and tap waters were collected freshly, adjusted the pH to 7 (PBS) and subjected to detection without any pre-treatment. Results of free-Cl detected by the proposed method were compared to the DPD method [7].

### 3. Results and discussion

Fig. 1 shows the cyclic voltammograms of the polymelamine-SPCE in the absence/presence of free-Cl in 0.1 M, pH 7 PBS. The polymelamine-SPCE exhibits a well behaved redox reaction with an enhancement in the cathodic peak current after the addition of free-Cl. The increase in current comes from the reduction of the functional group of  $-N=N-$

to  $-NH-NH-$  and then catalytically oxidized by free-Cl in a cyclic manner. It is based on EC' mechanism, as illustrated below:



As shown in the figure, the polymelamine was characterized by AFM and a film thickness of 2.4  $\mu\text{m}$  was formed on SPCE. Based on Cottrell equation [24,25], chronoamperometry was next employed to investigate the kinetic behavior of catalytic reaction at 0.125 V. To calculate diffusion coefficient ( $D$ ), a plot of  $Qt^{-1/2}$  vs. free-Cl (Fig. 2A inset (i)) was drawn using the data obtained from Fig. 2A. According to Eq. (1):

$$Q = (2nFA(Dt)^{1/2}C) / (\pi^{1/2}) \quad (1)$$

the value of  $D$  can be calculated from the slope of the plot as  $4.16 \times 10^{-6} \text{ cm}^2 \text{ s}^{-1}$ . The catalytic reaction rate constant ( $k$ ) was calculated using Eq. (2):

$$I_{\text{cat}}/I_L = (\pi kCt)^{1/2} \quad (2)$$

From the slope of the plot  $I_{\text{cat}}/I_L$  vs.  $t^{1/2}$  (Fig. 2A inset (ii)) for 3 mM free-Cl, the value of  $k$  was determined as  $2034.71 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1}$ . This explains the sharp feature of catalytic peak observed for reduction of free-Cl at the polymelamine film. Scan rate effect to this electrocatalytic phenomenon was further studied. As shown in Fig. 2B, the plot of  $\log(i_{\text{pc}})$  against the scan rate results in a linear plot with a slope of 0.55, suggesting that the reaction is diffusion-controlled. This favors the application of FIA in continuous monitoring of free-Cl. The hydrodynamic experimental parameters of 1.3 mL/min flow rate (Fig. 2C) and 0.125 V detection potential (Fig. 2D) were optimized and used in subsequent studies.

Fig. 3A shows the observed FIA responses for the calibration plot with a wide linear range from 10  $\mu\text{M}$  to 7 mM (regression coefficient of 0.9957) and detection limit of 5.5  $\mu\text{M}$  ( $S/N = 3$ ) based on 7 repeated injection of 10  $\mu\text{M}$  free-Cl. Note that this concentration range matches the minimum and maximum legal chlorine concentration between 1 and 3 mg/L (i.e., 19.4 and 58.3  $\mu\text{M}$ ) permitted by "WHO" [6]. Table 1 summarizes the advantage of the proposed method for free-Cl determination and the main advantage of our system lies in its simple application in continuous monitoring. Finally, it is concerned that the strong oxidizing properties of free-Cl might affect the polymelamine under consecutive measurements and thus the repeatability of the system under multiple injection of free-Cl was checked. As shown in Fig. 3B, with 30 continuous injections of 1 mM free-Cl, a relative standard deviation of 1.7% was obtained. These observations indicate that the polymelamine-SPCE is highly stable under continuous operation. The storage stability of electrode was checked regularly for a period of 7 days and a current response of 95% was retained on final day.

For the successful selective detection of free-Cl in real field application, the influence of coexisting species was studied. As can be seen (Fig. 3C), only free-Cl gave a signal while the other species exhibited almost no response upon injection. The excellent selectivity for free-Cl over other species shows that polymelamine-SPCE has potential applications for free-Cl detection in complex environmental samples.

In order to validate the potential applicability of the polymelamine-SPCE, the determination of free-Cl in swimming pool and tap waters was evaluated. Upon injection, swimming pool water was found to contain 20  $\mu\text{M}$  of free-Cl; whereas no free-Cl was detected in tap water. The matrix effect is also negligible in real sample analysis. For swimming pool and tap waters, the recoveries were found to be in the range of 97–102%. These results approve the polymelamine-SPCE's applicability

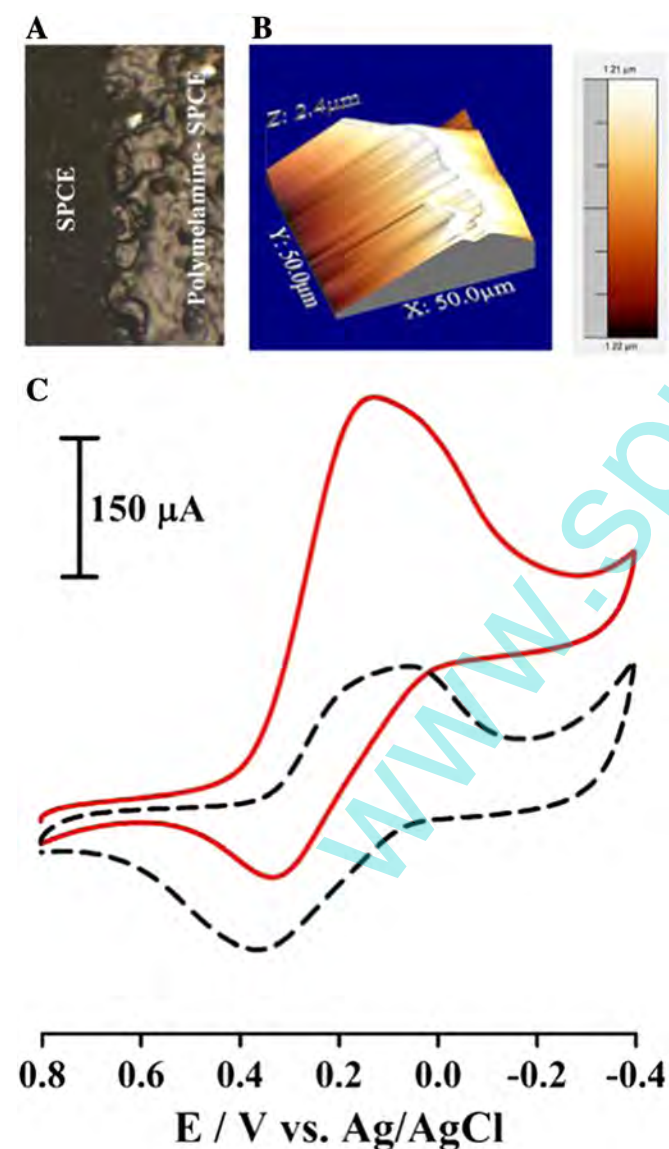
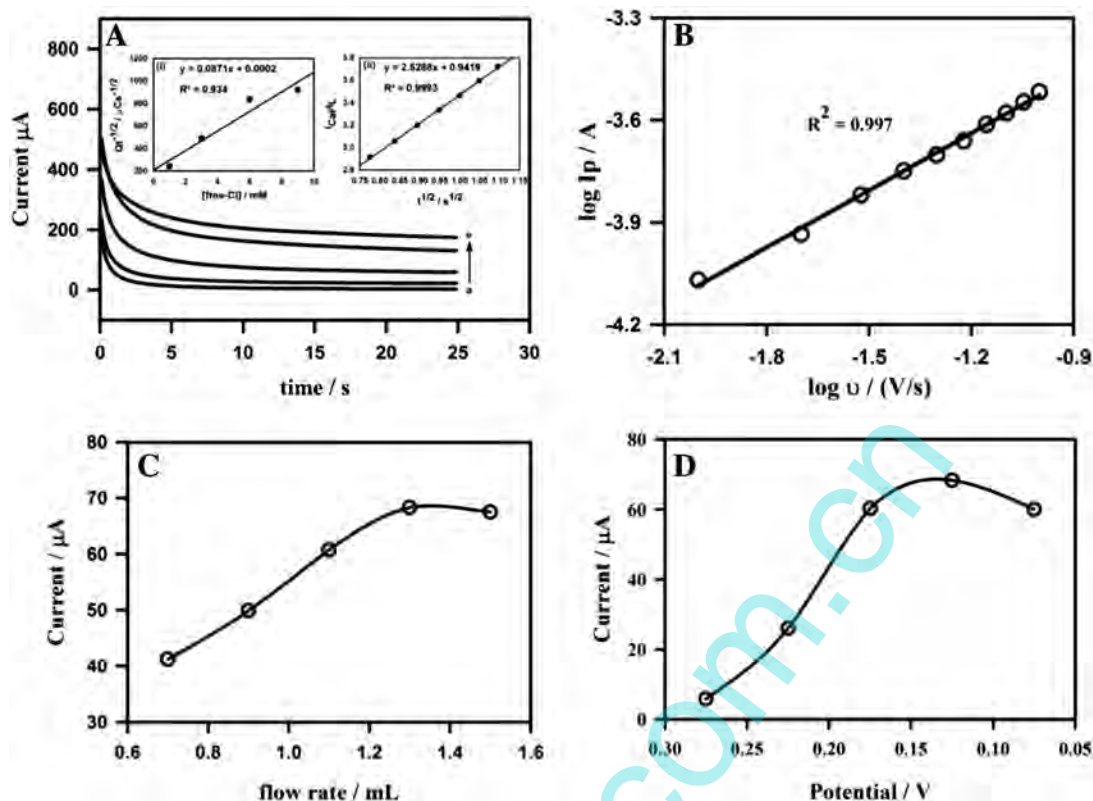


Fig. 1. (A) Optical image of SPCE and polymelamine-SPCE. (B) AFM image of (A). (C) Cyclic voltammograms observed at the polymelamine-SPCE in the absence (black dashed line) and presence (red solid line) of 7 mM free-Cl in 0.1 M, pH 7 PBS under a scan rate of 50 mV/s. (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)



**Fig. 2.** (A) Chronoamperometric results of the polymelamine-SPCE in 0.1 M, pH 7 PBS containing (a) blank, (b) 1 mM, (c) 3 mM, (d) 6 mM and (e) 9 mM of free-Cl. (B) Scan rate effect to the catalytic reduction current for 3 mM free-Cl in 0.1 M, pH 7 PBS. (C) Effect of flow rate on free-Cl detection at a fixed potential of 0.125 V (vs. Ag/AgCl). (D) Effect of applied potential at a fixed flow rate of 1.3 mL/min.

in real field application. Finally, the results were further validated with standard DPD method. Four samples of swimming pool waters were analyzed and results of 20.3, 20.0, 20.1 and 19.9  $\mu\text{M}$  were in good agreement with those of 20.5, 20.8, 19.8 and 20.0  $\mu\text{M}$  obtained by standard DPD method.

#### 4. Conclusion

Our work demonstrated the polymelamine-SPCE as a feasible approach for the analytical determination of free-Cl at low potential with a wide linear range and low detection limit. It shows excellent analytical characteristics such as good selectivity, sensitivity, robustness and stability for free-Cl detection. Flow injection analysis shows satisfied results in real sample analysis. The polymelamine-SPCE has a potential as a promising tool that can be applied for the routine analysis of free-Cl in swimming pool and tap waters.

#### Conflict of interest

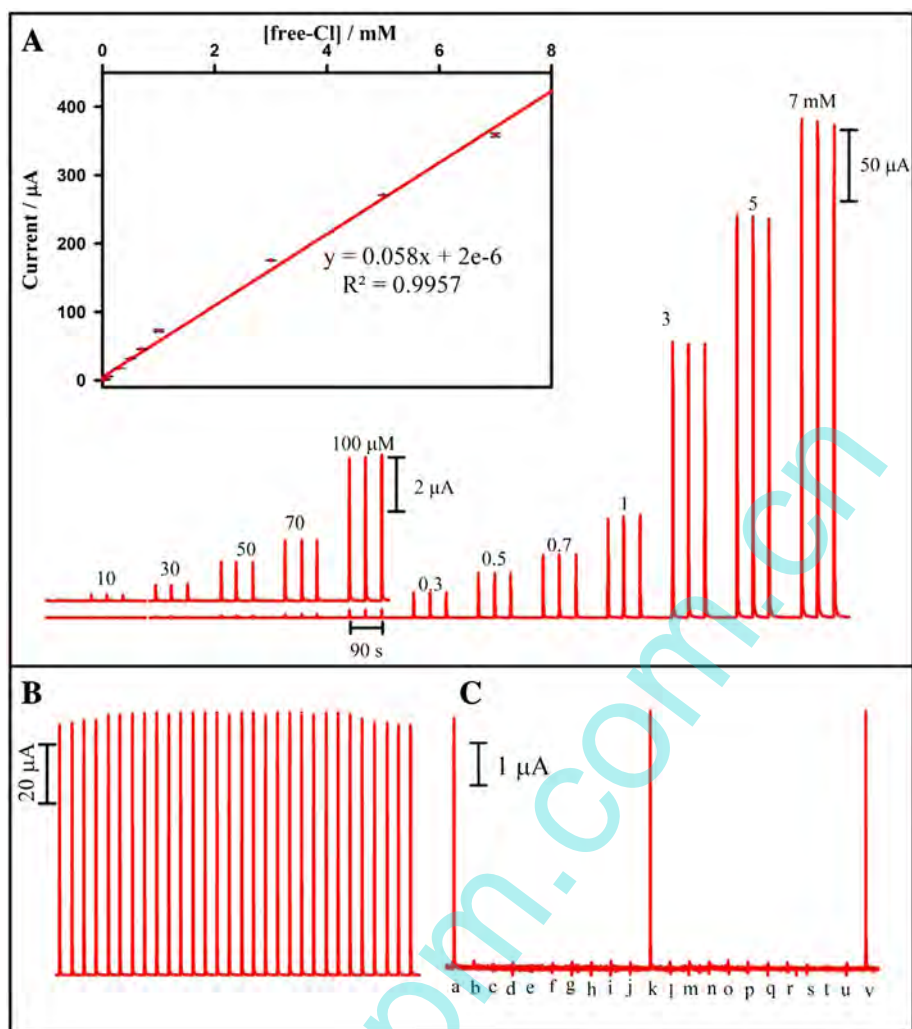
None.

#### Acknowledgment

The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support from the Ministry of Science and Technology of Taiwan.

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**Fig. 3.** (A) Typical FIA responses observed at the polymelamine-SPCE with increasing concentration of free-Cl in 0.1 M, pH 7 PBS. Inset shows calibration curve. (B) FIA responses of 1 mM free-Cl for 30 continuous injections. (C) Selectivity of the polymelamine-SPCE in 0.1 M, pH 7 PBS (a–v: free-Cl,  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$ , EtOH, urea,  $\text{ClO}_3^-$ ,  $\text{NO}_2^-$ ,  $\text{S}_2\text{O}_4^{2-}$ ,  $\text{CO}_3^-$ ,  $\text{NO}_3^-$ ,  $\text{ClO}_4^-$ , free-Cl,  $\text{Cl}^-$ ,  $\text{SO}_4^{2-}$ ,  $\text{Cu}^{2+}$ ,  $\text{Al}^{3+}$ ,  $\text{Zn}^{2+}$ ,  $\text{CO}_3^{2-}$ ,  $\text{Fe}^{3+}$ , saturated- $\text{O}_2$ ,  $\text{Na}^+$ ,  $\text{NH}_4^+$ , free-Cl). [free-Cl] = 100  $\mu\text{M}$  and [interferants] = 1 mM.

**Table 1**  
Comparison of various methods for free-Cl detection.

Electrode	Reaction	pH	Potential vs. Ag/AgCl	Linear range	LOD $\mu\text{M}$	Sensitivity $\text{AM}^{-1}$	Ref.
Graphite electrode	Oxidation	10	1.03	19.44 $\mu\text{M}$ –5.83 mM	19.4	–	[15]
BDD electrode	Oxidation	8	1.4	0.39–1.94 mM	0.16	0.038	[16]
Bare Pt electrode	Reduction	7	0.15	0–29.15 mM	1.36	0.0093	[11]
Au micro electrode	Reduction	5.5	0.35	3.89–97.17 $\mu\text{M}$	0.39	0.012	[12]
AuNps/PEDOT/GCE	Reduction	7	0.0	1 $\mu\text{M}$ –0.932 mM	1	0.21	[13]
MnTAPP-nano Au/GCE	Reduction	10.4	–0.15	24 $\mu\text{M}$ –10.7 mM	24	–	[14]
Polymelamine-SPCE	EC	7	0.125	10 $\mu\text{M}$ –7 mM	5.5	0.058	This work