We report here a general strategy to read out potentiometric signals via a photoelectrochemical method. The photocurrent at a working electrode coated with a ZnSe/r-GO composite can be modulated by a polymeric membrane ion-selective electrode that works as a reference electrode.

Potentiometric sensors based on ion-selective electrodes (ISEs) are widely applied in clinical diagnostics, industrial analysis, and environmental monitoring. Their potentiometric responses ideally obey the Nernst equation, which predicts a relatively poor sensitivity for a small ion activity variation. With the introduction of alternative sensing concepts, new ion-selective readout strategies sensitive to and selective for ion detection, new transduction schemes with simple operation, high sensitivity and integrated platforms are still needed.

Photoelectrochemical (PEC) analysis has attracted considerable attention as a newly developed and promising analytical technique. As an evolutionary generation of electrochemistry, the PEC technique is greatly different from the traditional electrochemical methods and offers some merits that could not be realized from the latter. In the PEC method, the photoactive material is excited by a light source and the output signal is in the form of current. The light source and detection signal are completely separated and in different energy forms. Therefore, compared with traditional electrochemical methods, PEC analysis has a higher sensitivity because of its reduced background signals. Also, different from classical potentiometry, amperometric methods can measure the current at the pA level. Moreover, compared with optical techniques that necessitate complicated and expensive equipment, the utilization of an electronic readout makes the PEC instrumentation simpler, cheaper, and easier to miniaturize. Thus, photoelectrochemical current can be a good option for reading the potentiometric response of ISEs.

Herein, a new strategy is proposed to convert potentiometric signals to PEC readouts. Due to the wide direct band gap (2.7 eV) and its transparency over a wide range of the visible spectrum, zinc selenide (ZnSe) was selected as the photoactive material. Moreover, ZnSe was attached onto reduced graphene oxide (r-GO) to depress electron–hole recombination and reporter for field-effect transistors and ISEs. As an alternative, we designed ion sensing platforms by converting potentiometric signals to a colorimetric readout through the potential-modulated release of enzyme, which could increase the detection sensitivity due to the enzyme amplification effect. A colorimetric readout can also be obtained by the turnover of a redox indicator in a thin layer using a closed bipolar electrode. Recently, Maksymiuk et al. proposed an approach based on a self-feeding bipolar electrode system for reading the potential response of ISEs with fluorescence. While these methods are sensitive to and selective for ion detection, new transduction schemes with simple operation, high sensitivity and integrated platforms are still needed.

Received 7th January 2020,
Accepted 25th February 2020
DOI: 10.1039/d0cc00138d
rsc.li/chemcomm

Xu Hun,†a Xiaoli Xiong,†ab Jiawang Dingbcd and Wei Qinbcd

† Electronic supplementary information (ESI) available: Experimental and characterization details, biophysical studies and additional figures as described in the text. See DOI: 10.1039/d0cc00138d
‡ Equal contribution.
solution can be converted to photocurrent ($I_{pc}$) as follows: $I_{pc} = k - k' A \frac{[e^{-k'' \log a_x}]}{1 + k'' \log a_x}$ where $k$, $k'$, $k''$, $A$ and $B$ can be constants.

The PEC performance of different electrodes under white light illumination was investigated. As presented in Fig. 1C, r-GO/GE displays a negative photocurrent, which is due to its n-type conductivity. The introduction of r-GO could effectively suppress electron hole pairs and improve the photo-induced carriers’ separation efficiency so as to enhance the photocurrent response. Indeed, a significantly higher photocurrent could be observed after introduction of r-GO into the ZnSe. To obtain the optimal PEC response, the influences of the content of GO in the ZnSe/r-GO composite, the amount of ZnSe/r-GO and pH on the photocurrent were investigated. As shown...
in Fig. 1D, the transient photocurrent response increases with an increase in the content of GO in the ZnSe/r-GO composite from 10 mg to 30 mg; nevertheless, the PEC response decreases when the content of GO exceeds 30 mg. This may be ascribed to the fact that excessive GO in the composites can act as a charge recombination center rather than an electron acceptor thereby leading to the light absorption of ZnSe. 26 Therefore, the ZnSe/r-GO composite containing 30 mg of GO was used for the present work. Furthermore, experiments show that the photocurrent response increases significantly along with an increase in the amount of ZnSe/r-GO coated on the GE surface (Fig. S2A, ESI†). The maximum photocurrent can be obtained when the amount of the ZnSe/r-GO reaches 0.06 mg. Further increasing the ZnSe/r-GO amount can lead to blocking transmission of visible light, thereby decreasing the electron transfer rate and increasing the recombination of the electrons/holes. 27 Thus, 0.06 mg of ZnSe/r-GO was used for further experiments. Experiments also reveal that the photocurrent versus potential curve is linear for different pHs in the range of 6.0–8.0 (Fig. S2B, ESI†).

Fig. 2A and B show that the photocurrent responses of ZnG-3 are enhanced on varying the bias potential from −0.20 to 0.50 V, indicating that the photocurrent depends on the working electrode potential. A good linear correlation (R2 = 0.999) between the photocurrent and potential can be obtained in the range of 0–0.4 V (Fig. 2C). More importantly, the current response is sensitive to a rather small potential variation (<2 mV) (Fig. 2D and Fig. S3, ESI†). Therefore, the photocurrent can be modulated by the potential at the working electrode.

As a proof of concept experiment, the detection of calcium ions in seawater was investigated. A typical Ca2+ISE that is sensitive to a rather small potential variation (ΔE = 1.1 mV) (Fig. 2D and Fig. S3, ESI†) was designed. The Ca2+ISE was used as the reference electrode in the PEC cell, so that a potential change at the reference electrode alters the resulting working electrode potential, which leads to a change in the photocurrent output. As shown in Fig. S5 (ESI†), a near-Nernstian response (−28.3 mV per decade) was observed for the sensor. The slope is negative and the sign of the potential is in the reverse direction, which indicates that the potential at the working electrode of the ZnG-3 composite can be modulated by the potential change at the Ca2+ISE. Since the potential difference was about 0.15 V when the Ag/AgCl (3 M KCl) electrode and the Ca2+ISE (10−2 M Ca2+) were used as the reference electrodes, respectively (Fig. S6, ESI†), 0.25 V was selected for further experiments. It should be noted that a plasmon-enhanced PEC sensing electrode based on TiO2@Ag@Ag3PO4 is available for monitoring Ca2+. 28 However, the requirement of the calmodulin functionalization may restrict its wide applications.

It is well known that the change in calcium ion concentration in seawater is rather small. 29 The responses of the ISE were tested for the activities of calcium varying from 4.2 × 10−3 to 6.1 × 10−3 M. As can be seen from Fig. 3A and B, for potentiometric measurements, a ca. 10% change in Ca2+ activity would correspond to a potential change of only ca. 1.1 mV. For 10−2 M Ca2+, the relative standard deviation (RSD) was found to be 2.6%. The photoelectrochemical analysis uses the current as the output signal and measurements can be made at the pA level, thus it can offer high sensitivity. Indeed, as shown in Fig. 3C and D, the resulting photocurrent versus activity of calcium is linear in the range of 4.2 × 10−3–6.1 × 10−3 M and the correlation coefficient (R2) is 0.997. A 10% change in Ca2+...
activity was detectable and the photocurrent difference was up to hundreds of nA, indicating that the proposed method can remarkably improve the sensitivity for Ca\(^{2+}\) ion detection. Compared with the potentiometric method, the RSD was 1.2% for the detection of 10\(^{-2}\) M Ca\(^{2+}\) by using the photoelectrochemical method. Therefore, this proposed method exhibits a high resolution for the detection of calcium in seawater. Moreover, the PEC sensor demonstrates acceptable stability and reproducibility for the detection of 10\(^{-2}\) M Ca\(^{2+}\), indicating that the result was reasonable.

Table 1 shows that the results obtained by the proposed method agree well with the traditional potentiometric ISE.

In order to explain the rationality of the results, a theoretical simulation of photoelectrochemical response was performed for detecting Ca\(^{2+}\) ions. As shown in Fig. S8 (ESI†), the theoretical simulation (parameters used for the simulation are given in Table S1, ESI†) was almost identical to the experimental data, indicating that the result was reasonable.

The average concentrations as well as the standard deviations of calcium measurements in real seawater were measured by using the proposed method, and conventional potentiometric ISE and ICP-OES methods (see Table 1). Experiments reveal that no obvious photocurrent change can be observed in the presence of high concentrations of NaCl (0.5 M, Fig. S9, ESI†). For the photoelectric and potentiometric measurements, the standard addition method was used to detect the amount of Ca\(^{2+}\) ions in seawater. Table 1 shows that the results obtained by the proposed photoelectrochemical sensor agree well with those of the other two reference methods. More importantly, the proposed method has a high resolution compared with the traditional potentiometric ISE.

In summary, a general approach to read out potentiometric signals by a photoelectrochemical method is proposed. This proposed technique offers several advantages over other methods. Firstly, in contrast to the conventional Ca-ISE with the Nernstian response, the present sensor exhibits high sensitivity and can be used for detection of small variations in ion activity (e.g., electrolyte measurements in clinical diagnosis). Secondly, the PEC technique is simple, integrated and easy to miniaturize. Thirdly, by changing the ion-selective electrode that serves as a reference electrode, the proposed method is promising for detecting a variety of different ions with high sensitivity.

This work was supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (41876108, 21575158, 21575073, and 21677172), the Laoshan Scholar Program of Qingdao University of Science and Technology (201802685), The Instrument Developing Project of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (Y728021021), the National Key Research and Development Program of China (No. 2016YFC1400700), the Taishan Scholar Program of Shandong Province (ts20181215, tsq201909-163) and the Key Research and Development Program of Yantai (2018ZHGY053).

Conflicts of interest
There are no conflicts to declare.

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Table 1 Results of determination of calcium in seawater samples

| Samples | ICP-OES (g L\(^{-1}\)) | Conventional Ca-ISE (g L\(^{-1}\)) | This work (g L\(^{-1}\)) |
|---------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Site 1  | 0.450 ± 0.012   | 0.448 ± 0.021   | 0.452 ± 0.010   |
| Site 2  | 0.454 ± 0.011   | 0.452 ± 0.016   | 0.457 ± 0.009   |
| Site 3  | 0.442 ± 0.008   | 0.431 ± 0.023   | 0.449 ± 0.002   |

* Mean ± deviation (n = 3).