Determination of heavy metals in water using an FTO electrode modified with CeO$_2$/rGO nanoribbons prepared by an electrochemical method

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The rGO/CeO$_2$/FTO nanocomposite modified electrode was prepared by an electrochemical method. A simple and highly sensitive electrochemical sensing platform for electrochemical rGO and modified CeO$_2$ nanoribbons directly on FTO electrodes was developed. Simultaneous determination of Pb$^{2+}$ and Cd$^{2+}$ used the differential pulse anodic stripping voltammetry (DPASV) method. The method was simple to operate, and CeO$_2$ nanobelts could be obtained simultaneously by electrodeposition and reduction of GO without further processing. This is an environmentally friendly electrochemical method to obtain modified electrodes under mild conditions. The experimental results showed that the linear calibration curves of Pb$^{2+}$ and Cd$^{2+}$ are 1–300 and 0.2–500 μg L$^{-1}$, respectively. At the same time, no interference from other coexisting metal ions was found during the detection process, which proved that the modified electrode had good stability and repeatability.

Introduction

The continuous development of science and technology and their increasingly far-reaching impact on daily life are everywhere, from simple food, clothing, housing, and transportation to complex energy development and utilization and environmental protection. The application of nano-semiconductor materials has penetrated all life aspects, such as photovoltaic cells, gas sensors, supercapacitors, and other fields. Researchers have applied the functional properties of nanometal oxide films in different fields, such as photoelectric cells, gas sensors, and biosensors. Due to nanofilm's excellent structural properties, such as highly ordered structure, high surface area, pore structure, moderate pore size range, and pore distribution, researchers have conducted several investigations to synthesize, characterize, and apply these uniform porous materials to catalysis, adsorption, and sensing in the past decade.

Graphene is a carbon nanomaterial with a two-dimensional structure composed of two-dimensional single-layer sp$^2$ hybridized carbon atoms. Its large specific surface area, high electrical conductivity, excellent electrocatalytic activity, good mechanical flexibility, and low cost make it the best candidate material for modified electrodes for electrochemical sensors. However, graphene is prone to aggregation, which reduces its available surface area and adsorption capacity. Therefore, combining graphene with other materials is necessary to improve its electrochemical performance.

CeO$_2$ is one of the most important rare earth materials. Due to its nontoxicity, low cost, strong ability to store, release, and transport oxygen, and electrocatalytic performance, it has been widely used in fuel cells, sensors, supercapacitors, and other fields. These CeO$_2$ characteristics are mainly related to the relationship between its two valence states, Ce$^{3+}$ and Ce$^{4+}$, and their structure and morphology. Therefore, if graphene and nanostructured CeO$_2$ are used in electrochemical sensors, the presence of metal ions is expected to improve the detection performance of electrochemical sensors.

Based on this, we prepared a CeO$_2$/GO/FTO composite nanomaterial-modified electrode to detect heavy metal ions Pb$^{2+}$. This work aims to improve the analytical performance and create a sensitive and environmentally friendly electrochemical platform. We first electrochemically reduced graphene oxide (GO) directly to reduced graphene oxide (rGO), simultaneously fabricated CeO$_2$ nanoribbons and reduced graphene oxide using cathodic electrodeposition to form nanocomposites. Cd$^{2+}$ and Pb$^{2+}$ were measured using DPASV. This method can control the thickness of CeO$_2$/GO nanocomposites. The modified composite electrode has a larger active surface area and higher...
conductivity. The experimental results show that the composite electrode has a good volt-ampere response to Pb\(^{2+}\) and Cd\(^{2+}\). This novel, fast, and sensitive electrochemical sensor can be used to detect Pb\(^{2+}\) and Cd\(^{2+}\) in actual water samples.

**Experimental**

**Reagent**

The chemicals used in the experiment are all analytical reagent grade and were used without further purification. Metal ions Pb\(^{2+}\) and Cd\(^{2+}\), sodium acetate trihydrate, glacial acetic acid (99.5%), disodium hydrogen phosphate dodecahydrate, and sodium dihydrogen phosphate dihydrate were all purchased from Sinopharm Chemical Reagent Co. Ltd (China). Cerium(n) nitrate hexahydrate (\(\text{Ce(NO}_3\text{)}_3 \cdot 6\text{H}_2\text{O}\) (99% purity) was purchased from Aladdin. GO was purchased from Xianfeng Nanomaterials Co. Ltd A phosphate buffer solution (10 mM, pH = 7, PBS) was obtained by mixing appropriate amounts of disodium hydrogen and sodium dihydrogen phosphates. Prepare an acetate buffer solution (0.1 M, pH = 5, ABS) by mixing an appropriate amount of 0.1 M sodium acetate and 0.1 M acetic acid. All solutions were prepared with ultrapure water (millipore, 18 M\(\Omega\) cm\(^{-1}\)).

**Instrument**

The electrochemical test is carried out on a CHI 660E using a three-electrode system. FTO conductive glass (10 mm × 25 mm, SuZhou ShangYang Solar Technology Co. Ltd) was used as the working electrode. Ag/AgCl and platinum wire were used as the reference and counter electrodes, respectively. For sheet emission scanning electron microscope (FEI Apero S) was used to examine the morphology and structure of rGO and rGO/CeO\(_2\) composites. The crystal characteristics of the sample are characterized by X-ray powder diffraction (XRD; SmartLab-SE).

**Preparation of modified electrodes**

The graphite oxide powder was peeled off into an aqueous solution by ultrasonic treatment to obtain 0.5 mg mL\(^{-1}\) GO suspension. The suspension was dropped onto a clean FTO conductive glass. Before using, the FTO was ultrasonically cleaned with double distilled water, acetone, and ethanol and dried with nitrogen. Under magnetic stirring, cyclic voltammetry (CV) at a rate of 100 mV s\(^{-1}\) between −1.8 to −0.6 V was used to electrochemically reduce GO on the FTO electrode surface to obtain rGO. Simultaneously, CeO\(_2\) nanoribbons were deposited on the surface. After electrochemical reduction, the working electrode was washed with double distilled water and dried under an infrared heating lamp for 5 min for subsequent experiments.

**DPASV analysis program**

Heavy metal ions were analyzed using DPASV in a 0.1 M acetae buffer solution. rGO/CeO\(_2\)/FTO, Ag/AgCl, and Pt wire electrodes were immersed in an electrochemical cell containing 0.1 M acetate buffer (pH 4.5), and the target metal ions were added. A voltage of −0.7 V under stirring was used as the preconcentration voltage, and the target metal was reduced on the working electrode surface by pretreating for 150 s.

After 10 s of equilibration, the DPASV potential was scanned from −1.0 to 0 V. Then, a voltage of 0.3 V was used to perform a 60 s cleaning step before the next cycle in a fresh supporting electrolyte while stirring to remove the target metal. (All potentials relative to the Ag/AgCl electrode are given.)

**Results and discussion**

**Preparation of CeO\(_2\)/rGO/FTO nanocomposite-modified electrode**

The electrochemical deposition of CeO\(_2\) porous membrane adopts CV using different working electrodes immersed in fresh cerium nitrate solution with increasing concentration (0.01, 0.1, and 0.2 M), and the potential range was from −1.8 to −0.6 V vs. Ag/AgCl/KCl sat. As shown in Fig. 1(a), the hysteresis of the reverse scan indicates that the metal oxide film was deposited on the FTO surface. In addition, as the concentration of the cerium nitrate solution increases, the hysteresis and current density increase by 22.

Used CV to study the catalytic reaction performance of the electrode surface, using different electrodes in a solution containing 5 mM \[\text{Fe(CN)}_6^{3-/4-}\] with 0.1 M KCl to compare the electrical properties of each electrode. The chemical properties were shown in Fig. 1(b). The picture indicates a pair of prominent redox peaks in the CV diagram of CeO\(_2\)/rGO/FTO electrode. The oxidation and reduction peaks were 0.35 and 0.13 V, respectively, corresponding to the Fe\(^{2+}/Fe^{3+}\) redox ion pair. Compared with CeO\(_2\)/rGO/FTO, the current responses of rGO/FTO and CeO\(_2\)/FTO were significantly reduced, indicating that CeO\(_2\)-modified electrode owned a particular obstructive effect on the electron transportability. This result shows that attaching CeO\(_2\) to the FTO surface hinders the electron transfer speed on the electrode surface. The electrode current increases after CeO\(_2\)/rGO/FTO hybrid nanocomposite was modified.

The effects of different scan rates on the redox reactions of Pb\(^{2+}\) and Cd\(^{2+}\) in CeO\(_2\)/rGO/FTO nanocomposite modified electrodes were investigated by cyclic voltammetry. As shown in Fig. 2(a) and (c), the oxidation peak currents of Pb\(^{2+}\) and Cd\(^{2+}\) both increased with the increase of scan rate. Through the CVs curve, the oxidation peak current was linearly fitted to the scan

![Fig. 1](Image)

Fig. 1 (a) Cyclic voltammograms (CV) represent the electrocathodic deposition of cerium nanostructured film on FTO surface (0.01, 0.1, and 0.2 M \(\text{Ce(NO}_3\text{)}_3 \cdot 6\text{H}_2\text{O}\) at a scan rate of 100 mV s\(^{-1}\)) and (b) CV measured with CeO\(_2\)/FTO, rGO/FTO, and CeO\(_2\)/rGO/FTO hybrid nanocomposite-modified electrodes in the solution of 5 mM of Fe(\(\text{CN})_6^{3-/4-}\) containing 0.1 M of KCl.
rate, as shown in Fig. 2(b) and (d). When the scan rate increased from 100 to 600 mV s\(^{-1}\), there was a good linear relationship between the oxidation peak current and the scan rate, and the linear equations were \(I_{\text{pa}}(\text{Cd}^{2+}) = 0.12(v) + 37.01\) (\(R^2 = 0.98\)) and \(I_{\text{pa}}(\text{Pb}^{2+}) = 0.26(v) + 76.90\), (\(R^2 = 0.99\)). This indicated that the kinetic behavior of the CeO\(_2\)/rGO/FTO modified electrode in this electrochemical reaction was an adsorption process.\(^{21}\)

**Characterization of CeO\(_2\)/rGO/FTO**

The structure and morphology of CeO\(_2\)/rGO/FTO nanocomposites were investigated using field emission scanning electron microscopy. Fig. 3(a) shows the bare FTO with a relatively smooth surface. From Fig. 3(b), the rGO on FTO was in the form of a thin film with some large wrinkled protrusions on the surface. Fig. 3(c) shows the electrochemical preparation of CeO\(_2\) nanoribbons on the FTO surface. It can be seen that the CeO\(_2\) nanoribbons are helically intertwined on the FTO surface. Fig. 3(d) shows the surface of the electrode modified by the CeO\(_2\)/rGO/FTO nanocomposite material. The nanoribbons and wrinkle structure can be observed. After the composite material was superimposed, the specific surface area increases, showed a three-dimensional porous structure, which was expected to increase electroactive sites, making the sensor more favorable for electron transportation. To further characterize the elemental distribution on the CeO\(_2\)/rGO/FTO modified electrode surface, an energy dispersive X-ray spectroscopy analysis was performed. Fig. 3(e) was the element content distribution map of the Energy Dispersive Spectrometer (EDS) surface scan of CeO\(_2\)/rGO/FTO. The strong signal peaks of C, O, and Ce can be seen.

The XRD patterns of CeO\(_2\)/rGO/FTO nanocomposites are shown in Fig. 4(a) The XRD pattern results revealed that the CeO\(_2\) nanostructures owned diffraction peaks of (111), (200), (220), (311), (222), (400), and (420) planes, which point to the CeO\(_2\) cubic fluorescence. The stone structure, intensities, and positions of the peaks are consistent with those of the standard card (JCPDS card no. 43-1002). CeO\(_2\)/rGO/FTO composites were successfully prepared based on the above
characterizations. The surface elements of CeO2/rGO/FTO composite films were further analyzed by X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS). Nine distinct main characteristic peaks of Ce3d orbital in CeO2 can be observed in Fig. 4(b), located at 916.5, 907.3, 903.5, 900.7, 899.1, 885.3, 882.2 and 880.6 eV (spin–orbit splitting peaks), respectively. The characteristic peaks compared with the standard card were all attributed to Ce4+, so the main valence state of Ce in this composite material was +4.

Optimization of experimental parameters

The target metal ions were determined by the DPASV method. Considering the sensitivity and peak shape, different experimental conditions such as Ce(NO3)3·6H2O concentration, deposition potential, deposition time, and pH value were optimized to use the best test conditions. These experiments were performed in a 0.1 M acetate buffer containing 80 µg L⁻¹ Cd²⁺ and 50 µg L⁻¹ Pb²⁺.

The concentration of Ce(NO3)3·6H2O controls the bonding degree of CeO2 nanoribbons, which in turn affects the electrochemical response of the rGO/CeO2 composite electrode. The effect of Ce(NO3)3·6H2O concentration on the stripping signal of Cd²⁺ and Pb²⁺ was studied (Fig. 5(a) and (b)). The test shows that the largest peak current is obtained in the nanomodified electrode deposited by 0.1 M Ce(NO3)3·6H2O, which is consistent with the above results. Therefore, subsequent experiments use this condition to prepare modified electrodes.

The effect of the preconcentration potential on the anode dissolution peak current was studied in the potential range of −0.1 to −0.9 V, and the observation results are shown in Fig. 5(c) and (d). Stripping voltammetry is one of the basic experimental parameters that need to be optimized before testing the analyte. Cd²⁺ and Pb²⁺ reached their maximum values at a reduction potential of −0.7 V, after which the peak current decreased. This is because a high negative potential causes the background of hydrogen to precipitate, interfering with the analyte signal. At the same time, the potential is too low, resulting in the reduction of tin oxide on the electrode. Therefore, the deposition potential needs to be optimized to ensure that hydrogen evolution does not occur while ensuring that a reasonable amount of analyte is deposited on the working electrode before stripping. Therefore, an enrichment potential of −0.7 V was used for all further studies.

As shown in Fig. 5(e) and (f), the effect of the deposition time was studied. The preconcentration was performed in a 0.1 M acetate buffer solution at an enrichment potential of −0.7 V in a time of 50–300 s. It is believed that a lower detection limit can be reached with a longer deposition time. However, too long a deposition time will cause fouling on the electrode surface, which will affect its analytical performance. Therefore, a deposition time of 150 s is the best choice.

Changes in the oxidation peak currents of lead and cadmium ions at pH values between 3.5 and 5.5 (Fig. 5(g) and (h)) were investigated in a 0.1 M acetate buffer solution. CeO2/rGO/FTO had a great influence on the oxidation peak current of Cd²⁺ and Pb²⁺ in buffer solutions with different pH values. The best signals for Cd²⁺ and Pb²⁺ were observed at a weakly acidic pH of 4.5. To obtain the best sensitivity to target metal ions, a pH of 4.5 was used as the optimal pH for subsequent experiments. The decrease in peak current at lower pH can be attributed to graphene protonation. At higher pH, the decrease in peak current may be due to the formation of metal hydroxide complexes.

Performance analysis

Under the best experimental conditions, the DPASV was used to simultaneously measure Cd²⁺ and Pb²⁺ on the rGO/CeO2/FTO nanocomposite-modified electrode. As shown in Fig. 6, for Cd²⁺ and Pb²⁺, the DPASV response and the resulting calibration graph are linear in the range of 1–300 and 0.2–500 µg L⁻¹. The
DPASV peak current is obtained by correcting the baseline, and then the calibration chart is evaluated based on the peak current. The corresponding calibration curves are \( y = -0.05x - 1.79 \) and \( y = -72.79x - 46.87 \), and their correlation coefficients, \( R_2 \) are 0.986 and 0.984, respectively, \((x: \text{concentration (m} \, \mu \text{g} \, \text{L}^{-1})\) and current (µA)). The limit of detection (LOD) were estimated to be 0.35 and 0.04 m\( \mu \)g L\(^{-1}\), based on three times the background noise (S/N = 3). The theoretical LOD was calculated from 3SD/S, where SD was the measurements. Therefore, the rGO/CeO\(_2\)/FTO nanocomposite electrode can be used as a good platform for determining heavy metal ions.

The detection performance of the rGO/CeO\(_2\)/FTO composite nanomaterial-modified electrochemical sensor for lead and cadmium ions is compared with other reported cerium-based modified electrodes (Table 1). The results show that rGO/CeO\(_2\)/FTO has an excellent performance in determining cadmium and lead ions, and the modified electrodes are cost effective and easy to fabricate.

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### Table 1: Comparison of the proposed sensor with certain reported methods

| S. No. | Electrodes                                      | Linear range Cd\(^{2+}\) | Linear range Pb\(^{2+}\) | Detection limit Cd\(^{2+}\) | Detection limit Pb\(^{2+}\) | Ref. |
|--------|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|------|
| 1      | Zeolite-modified carbon paste                   | 5–500 µg L\(^{-1}\)       | 50–500 µg L\(^{-1}\)      | 0.46 µg L\(^{-1}\)         | 0.07 µg L\(^{-1}\)         | 29   |
| 2      | CeO\(_2\)-CNFs                                 | 0.02–2.5 µM                | 0.01–2.5 µM               | –                           | –                           | 30   |
| 3      | Terephthalic acid capped Fe\(_2\)O\(_3\) NPs    | 0.06–1.1 µM                | 0.04–2 µM                 | 0.05 µM                     | 0.01 µM                     | 31   |
| 4      | Multiwalled CNTs                               | —                          | —                         | 8.4 µL\(^{-1}\)            | 6.6 µL\(^{-1}\)            | 32   |
| 5      | Bismuth modified(3-mercaptopropyl) trimethoxy silane (MPTMS) | 0.56–11.24 µL\(^{-1}\) | 1.04–20.72 µL\(^{-1}\) | 0.37 µL\(^{-1}\)           | 1.3 µL\(^{-1}\)           | 33   |
| 6      | rGO                                            | 20–200 µg L\(^{-1}\)      | 20–200 µg L\(^{-1}\)      | 0.6 µL\(^{-1}\)           | 0.2 µL\(^{-1}\)           | 34   |
| 7      | CuZrO\(_3\) nanocomposites                     | 1–100 µg L\(^{-1}\)       | 0.5–80 µg L\(^{-1}\)      | 0.5 µL\(^{-1}\)           | 0.1 µL\(^{-1}\)           | 35   |
| 8      | rGO/CeO\(_2\)/FTO nanoribbons                 | 1–300 µg L\(^{-1}\)       | 0.2–500 µg L\(^{-1}\)     | 0.35 µL\(^{-1}\)           | 0.04 µL\(^{-1}\)           | This work |
Stability and reproducibility of CeO2/rGO/FTO electrode

Stability and reproducibility are also essential key factors in the study of electrochemical sensor performance. The CeO2/rGO/FTO composite nanomodified electrode was prepared under optimized experimental conditions, and 80 μg L⁻¹ Cd²⁺ and 50 μg L⁻¹ Pb²⁺ were tested 10 times by the DPASV in a 0.1 M acetate buffer solution to evaluate the sensor repeatability, as shown in Fig. 8(a) and (b). During the test, the peak current value was recorded each time, and the relative standard deviation (RSD) was calculated to be 3.89%, indicating that the sensor has good repeatability. Next, the stability of the electrode was tested as shown in Fig. 8(c) and (d). The modified electrode was stored at 4 °C and tested once a day for 7 consecutive days under the same test conditions. Record each time The peak current value of Cd²⁺ and Pb²⁺ can still reach 96.4% of the original peak current value on the 7th day, indicating that the sensor has good stability. Ten different FTOs were used for parallel stripping measurements under the same experimental conditions to evaluate the sensor reproducibility. The peak current values obtained were close, and the calculated RSD was about 5.42%, indicating that the sensor has good reproducibility (Fig. 8(e) and (f)).

Sample analysis

For the purpose of practical application, the practicability and accuracy of the rGO/CeO2/FTO composite-modified electrode were tested. The modified electrode was used to detect Cd²⁺ and Pb²⁺ on tap water samples collected from the local area by adding standard methods. Tap water was spiked with standard solutions of Cd²⁺ and Pb²⁺ at different concentrations, and each sample was analyzed three times. The average sensor recovery (% ± RSD) calculated are summarized in Table 2. It shows that the rGO/CeO2/FTO composite-modified electrode has a good application prospect in analyzing lead ions in actual samples.

Interference research

Anti-interference studies were performed by adding a variety of potentially interfering metal cations, including Zn²⁺, Cu²⁺, Co²⁺, Ni²⁺, and Fe³⁺, by a factor of 50 over the target. Under the optimal experimental conditions obtained by the above optimization, standard solutions of 80 μg L⁻¹ Cd²⁺ and 50 μg L⁻¹ Pb²⁺ were added for testing. The current ratios of target ions to

Table 2  Application study

| Sample     | Added (μg L⁻¹) | Founded (μg L⁻¹) | RSD (%) | Recovery (%) |
|------------|---------------|-----------------|---------|--------------|
|            | Cd²⁺ | Pb²⁺ | Cd²⁺ | Pb²⁺ | Cd²⁺ | Pb²⁺ | Cd²⁺ | Pb²⁺ |
| Tap water 1 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 93.93% | 90.33% |
|            | 10.00 | 1.00 | 9.39 | 0.90 | 4.85% | 4.61% | 100.47% | 98.33% |
|            | 30.00 | 3.00 | 30.14 | 2.95 | 4.26% | 2.96% | 100.73% | 104.67% |
|            | 50.00 | 5.00 | 49.58 | 4.96 | 1.59% | 2.10% | 100.74% | 103.27% |
| Tap water 2 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 108.07% | 112.33% |
|            | 10.00 | 1.00 | 10.81 | 1.12 | 5.61% | 4.57% | 100.73% | 104.67% |
|            | 30.00 | 3.00 | 30.22 | 3.14 | 3.69% | 3.32% | 100.73% | 104.67% |
|            | 50.00 | 5.00 | 50.37 | 5.16 | 2.00% | 1.80% | 100.73% | 104.67% |
interfering ions in the absence (I₀) and presence (I) of interfering metal ions are shown in Fig. 9. Most substances have almost no interference with the signals of 80 μg L⁻¹ Cd²⁺ and 50 μg L⁻¹ Pb²⁺. The absolute value of the relative signal change varies from 2.98% to 6.02%, indicating that the modified electrode has satisfactory selectivity for determining Pb²⁺ and Cd²⁺ (Fig. 9).

Conclusions

Reduced rGO and CeO₂ nanoribbons were directly prepared by cathodic electrodeposition, and a novel reduced graphene oxide/ceium oxide nanoribbon modified electrode (CeO₂/rGO/FTO) was prepared. Using CeO₂/rGO/FTO modified electrode as the electrochemical sensing platform, DPASV was used to simultaneously and selectively detect Cd²⁺ and Pb²⁺. During the experiment, experimental variables, including deposition potential, deposition time, buffer solution pH, and cerium-based concentration, were optimized to determine the best experimental conditions. The experimental results show that the linear calibration curve ranges of Cd²⁺ and Pb²⁺ are 1–300 and 0.2–500 μg L⁻¹, respectively, and the detection limits are 0.35 and 0.04 μg L⁻¹. In addition, CeO₂/rGO/FTO nanoribbons modified electrodes have been successfully applied to detect and analyze Cd²⁺ and Pb²⁺ in real water samples, and satisfactory results have been obtained.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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