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Published in:
Meeting Abstracts - Electrochemical Society

Publication date:
2007

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link back to DTU Orbit](#)

Citation (APA):

Bonde, J. L., Jaramillo, T., Jørgensen, K. P., Horch, S., Nielsen, J. H., & Chorkendorff, I. (2007). Identification and Quantification of the Active Sites for Hydrogen Evolution on MoS₂ Nanoparticles. In *Meeting Abstracts - Electrochemical Society* (pp. Abstract 88). The Electrochemical Society.

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Identification and Quantification of the Active Sites for Hydrogen Evolution on MoS₂ Nanoparticles.

Jacob Bonde¹, Thomas F. Jaramillo¹,
 Kristina P. Jørgensen¹, Jane H. Nielsen¹,
 Sebastian Horch², Ib Chorkendorff¹

¹ Center for Individual Nanoparticle Functionality, CINF

² Center for Atomic-scale Materials Design, CAMD
 Nano-DTU,

Department of Physics, Building 312 and 307,
 Technical University of Denmark,
 DK-2800 Lyngby, Denmark

A possible future energy carrier under consideration is H₂, which can be produced cleanly and renewably if solar or wind energy is coupled to water electrolysis. Unfortunately, the Hydrogen Evolution Reaction (HER) is catalyzed most effectively by the Pt group metals – materials that are expensive and scarce. New materials are needed if this scheme is to ever become viable.

It has recently been proposed that the activity of HER electrocatalysts is governed by a simple descriptor: the free energy of hydrogen adsorption (ΔG_H). The activity follows the Sabatier principle with high catalytic activity at $\Delta G_H \approx 0$ [1]. The predictor can be calculated by Density Functional Theory (DFT), which opens new possibilities in terms of finding alternative HER catalysts [2].

Another system where the free energy of hydrogen adsorption ΔG_H is close to zero is nanoparticulate MoS₂. The active sites of MoS₂ are solid state analogs to the active sites on hydrogen evolving enzymes like hydrogenase. Preliminary results showed that hydrogen in fact was evolved on graphite supported nanoparticulate MoS₂ at a low overpotential [3].

Figure 1. STM images of MoS₂ particles on Au(111).

In order to investigate the MoS₂ in more detail we have measured activity for the HER of UHV prepared and atomically imaged (with a scanning tunnelling microscope) MoS₂ nanoparticles on Au(111). This made it possible to quantify the distribution of different sites present on the samples and compare that with the HER activity. On the MoS₂ model system (see Figure 1) there generally exists two different sites the terrace site and the edge site(predicted to be active for HER in [3]). Measurements of the HER on samples with different coverage and particle size showed that the activity only correlated with the edge length of the particles. Thus we conclude that the edge indeed is the active site for HER on nanoparticulate MoS₂, this also allows us to compare

the activity of MoS₂ to that of the pure metals plotted on the volcano in [1] and we find that the activity is below that of the Pt group metals and above that of the more common metals.

Investigations of the graphite supported nanoparticulate MoS₂/C investigated in [3] were also conducted. It was found that an irreversible oxidation of the MoS₂/C takes place at anodic potentials (approx. 0.8 V vs. NHE). This oxidation severely inhibited the activity of the active sites for HER on the MoS₂/C.

The irreversible oxidation shows up as a well-defined peak in the cyclic voltammogram and we were able to use this peak to quantify the amount of MoS₂/C present on the sample. Activity per site of MoS₂/C was then compared to that of MoS₂ on Au(111), preliminary results show that these activities are indeed comparable.

We have established that the irreversible oxidation method can be used to quantify the amount of nanoparticulate supported MoS₂. Results on other metal sulfides will also be presented.

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