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Trends of *Ab Initio* Oxygen Reduction Reaction Energetics of LaBO₃ (B=Mn, Fe, Co, and Ni) for Solid Oxide Fuel Cells

Yueh-Lin Lee*, Dane Morgan*, Jesper Kleis**, Jan Rossmeisl**,

*Department of Materials Science and Engineering, University of Wisconsin-Madison

1509 University Avenue, Madison, WI 53706, USA

**Center for Atomic-scale Materials Design

Department of Physics, Building 307,

Technical University of Denmark, Denmark

The perovskite type lanthanum strontium transition metal oxides (La,Sr)BO₃ (B=Mn, Fe, Co, and Ni) and closely related alloys are frequently explored as the cathode materials for solid oxide fuel cells (SOFCs) due to their ability to catalyze the oxygen reduction reaction (ORR), as well as low cost, high temperature stability and good electronic/ionic conductivity. The ORR contribution to the overpotential is expected to become increasingly important as other sources of voltage loss are reduced (*e.g.*, by the making thinner and less resistive electrolyte films) and as researchers push to lower the SOFC operating temperatures to reduce degradation rates and material costs [1]. The complex ORR mechanisms are still poorly understood, including the rate-limiting steps and how different transition metal cations alter the catalytic properties. We are using density functional theory (DFT) simulations to obtain surface oxygen binding, hopping, vacancy, and dissociation energies to understand the trends vs. transition metal types. Careful treatment of the O₂ gas [2] and application of the DFT+U method [3] (which corrects for the self interaction errors in the strongly correlated transition metal oxide systems) increase the accuracy of our study. Initial work is focused on the undoped LaBO₃ systems and {001} BO₂ surfaces. Surfaces are simulated with a LaBO₃ 8-layer slab (2×2×4 perovskite supercell) under periodic boundary conditions.

One of the issues of the DFT+U approach is the selection of U_{eff} (defined as U-J in [4], where U is the on-site Coulomb repulsion and J is the Hund's exchange interaction). When U_{eff} is fit to empirical data, the value can vary depending on the material properties that are fitted (band gaps, redox energetics, *etc.*). Nonetheless, it has been observed that errors in the LaBO₃ ORR relevant energetics can be greatly improved if an appropriate U_{eff} is applied [5]. To understand the ORR energetic trends vs. U_{eff} and how U_{eff} modifies the electronic structure, we have explored a wide range of U_{eff} (0~7 eV) for each LaBO₃ system. Our results suggest that adding U_{eff} stabilizes the reduction products, or conversely, destabilize the oxidation products, which is consistent with other DFT+U studies on the redox energetics of late transition metal oxides [2, 6]. However, an anomalous inverse energetic trend vs. U_{eff} is found in the oxygen vacancy formation reaction of bulk LaFeO₃, which is due to the special half filled 3d shell configuration. Interestingly, because of partial oxidation of Fe cations in FeO₂ terminated (001) surfaces, the reaction energy trends with U_{eff} for the surface oppose the bulk energetics, and thereby conform with the trends of the other LaBO₃ surfaces.

The ORR process at oxide surfaces is inherently complex with many possible pathways. To get directions towards new and more optimal materials, it is not only important to gain fundamental insight into the details of a

single system, but preferably to find fundamental intrinsic descriptors for the reaction process that can aid the search for new materials. Our detailed and systematic study of *ab initio* surface reaction energetics of fundamental reaction processes as oxygen adsorption, hopping, splitting and vacancy formation energies provides an excellent starting point for the search of descriptors that are likely to correlate with the ORR activity.

While tests of the commonly used *d*-band center as the descriptor for metal catalysts did not provide a clear correlation with the calculated energetics, we have observed the ORR energetics for all materials and U_{eff} are linearly correlated with the O *p*-band center. Figure 1 shows the surface oxygen vacancy formation energies and O above surface B site adsorption energies as a function of the O *p*-band center. Each point corresponds to different B metal cations and/or different U_{eff} values. The linear relationship between LaBO₃ surface ORR energetics and O *p*-band center can be understood based on a rigid band model, in which the energetics are related to electron interchange between the oxygen *p*-band and the Fermi energy level of the system. It is noted that the barrier of charge transfer between solids and O₂ molecules is not included in our energetic investigation due to the complexity of the calculations. Nonetheless, the existence of the linear relationship between O *p*-band center and the investigated LaBO₃ ORR energetics suggests the O *p*-band center, or equivalently, the O surface binding energy, could be a valuable descriptor for ORR activity.

Figure 1: LaBO₃ (001) BO₂ surface oxygen vacancy formation and O-B adsorption energies for various B cation and U_{eff}'s vs. O *p*-band center.

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