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Electrochemical Reduction of CO$_2$ Catalyzed by Fe-N-C Materials: a Structure-Selectivity Study

Tran Ngoc Huan, Nastaran Ranjbar, Gwenaëlle Rousse, Moulay Sougrati, Andrea Zitolo, Victor Mougel, Frédéric Jaouen, Marc Fontecave

ABSTRACT: Selective electrochemical reduction of CO$_2$ into energy-dense organic compounds is a promising strategy for using CO$_2$ as a carbon source. Herein, we investigate a series of iron-based catalysts synthesized by pyrolysis of Fe-, N- and C-containing precursors for the electroreduction of CO$_2$ to CO in aqueous conditions and demonstrate that the selectivity of these materials for CO$_2$ reduction over proton reduction is governed by the ratio of isolated FeN$_4$ sites vs. Fe-based nanoparticles. This ratio can be synthetically tuned to generate electrocatalysts producing controlled CO/H$_2$ ratios. It notably allows preparing materials containing only FeN$_4$ sites, which are able to selectively reduce CO$_2$ to CO in aqueous solution with Faradaic yields over 90% and at low overpotential.


INTRODUCTION

Electroreduction of CO$_2$ into energy-dense liquid or gaseous fuels as a way to store energy from intermittent sources has received renewed attention in the past few years. However, its practical implementation into technological devices (photovoltaic cells or electrolyzers coupled to photovoltaics) is highly challenging due to the inertness of CO$_2$ and the multiple electron and proton transfers required for its transformation. Efficient catalysts and appropriate reaction conditions (solvent, temperature...) must be developed to efficiently mediate these transfers, while keeping selectivity over the competing proton reduction into dihydrogen.$^{1-4}$ In that context, conversion of CO$_2$ into CO is an attractive target as it requires the transfer of only two electrons and two protons. CO finds many applications in bulk chemicals manufacturing and for the preparation of synthetic fuels via Fischer-Tropsch processes.

Recently, catalysts based on earth abundant metals that are integrated in, or supported on, carbon materials have been identified as promising alternatives to noble metal catalysts (Au, Ag) for reducing CO$_2$ in aqueous conditions.$^{5-16}$ In that context, Fe-N-C materials obtained by pyrolysis of Fe-, N- and C-containing precursors have been predicted$^{17}$ and reported$^{18}$ to be highly efficient for this transformation. However, one aspect limiting the rational development of Metal-N-C materials prepared via pyrolytic synthetic strategies is the identification of the actual active species. Numerous studies have indeed shown that these materials are often inhomogeneous and typically contain a significant amount of segregated and crystallographically-ordered structures of the metal (reduced metal, carbides, nitrides, etc...) along with atomically-dispersed metal ions hosted in the carbon matrix and coordinated with N and/or C atoms.$^{17}$ The simultaneous presence of several metal-based components in such materials has for a long time prevented the clear identification of the key actors in their overall activity and selectivity toward oxygen reduction.$^{18-20}$ The same challenge now applies to the identification of the sites in Metal-N-C materials that are active toward CO$_2$ reduction$^{21}$ and/or active toward the competing hydrogen evolution reaction.

In this work, we focused on the understanding of the structural parameters ruling the selectivity toward CO$_2$ electroreduction of pyrolyzed Fe-N-C materials. For that purpose we synthesized and characterized structurally and electrochemically a set of Fe-N-C materials with a variable proportion of single-Fe-atom centers and Fe-containing nanoparticles (Figure 1). This variety of Fe species was obtained by varying either the Fe content or the homogenization procedure of precursors carried out before the pyrolysis step. This series of materials allowed us establishing a structure-selectivity relationship for CO$_2$ reduction. We have here identified FeN$_4$ moieties as the key active sites for the selective CO$_2$ reduction into CO in aqueous conditions, while Fe nanoparticles mainly catalyze hydrogen evolution. The material containing FeN$_4$ moieties as the sole Fe species reached a Faradaic yield (FY) for CO formation of 91 %, one of the highest reported hitherto for either precious$^{21-24}$ or non-precious metal catalysts.$^{6,7,9,15}$ In addition, we have demonstrated that the CO/H$_2$ product ratio, an important parameter for the potential use as syngas for Fischer-Tropsch processes, can be easily controlled by tuning the ratio of FeN$_4$ moieties vs iron nanoparticles in Fe-N-C materials.
**RESULTS and DISCUSSION**

**Preparation of Fe-N-C materials**

All Fe-N-C materials of this study were prepared from a Zn-based zeolitic imidazolate framework (ZIF-8), ferrous acetate and phenanthroline, as described in detail in the Supporting information section. We synthesized and studied five different Fe-based materials, labeled Fe₅d, Fe₁0w, Fe₁d, Fe₀5d and Fe₀5d-950 according to the synthetic conditions. The subscript 0.5, 1.0 or 4.0 corresponds to the weight % Fe in the catalyst precursor, before pyrolysis. The final letter w (wet) or d (dry) indicates whether a wet impregnation step was applied (w) or not (d) before the milling step used for mixing ZIF-8, ferrous acetate and phenanthroline. The first four materials were prepared by pyrolysis in flowing Ar at 1050°C. An iron-free nitrogen-doped carbon material, labeled Fe₀5d, was prepared similarly by using only ZIF-8 and phenanthroline as precursors. The fifth Fe-containing material, namely Fe₀5d-950, was prepared by subjecting Fe₀5d to a second pyrolysis step in flowing ammonia at 950°C.

Powder X-ray diffraction (XRD) spectra (Figure S1) revealed the presence of a crystalline Fe-based structure (Fe₃C) only in the sample with the highest Fe content, namely Fe₂d, while for all other catalysts the diffractograms showed only two broad reflection peaks typical for the nanometric graphitic domains of amorphous N-doped carbon materials. As shown later in this work, the absence of diffraction peaks assigned to Fe structures does however not rule out the presence of non-crystalline FeₐNₓCₘ moieties or even of low amounts of crystalline Fe, due to the low sensitivity of powder XRD. We then resorted to ⁵⁷Fe Mössbauer spectroscopy and extended X-ray absorption fine structure (EXAFS), that are more sensitive and appropriate to identify the coordination of isolated Fe ions not embedded in a crystalline iron structure.

The Mössbauer spectra of the five Fe-N-C samples are shown in Figure 2a-e. In contrast with XRD, Mössbauer spectroscopy reveals the presence of Fe crystalline structures for all catalysts but Fe₀5d. It also shows the presence of atomically dispersed Fe ions in the N-doped carbon matrix, namely square-planar Fe(I)Nₓ or Fe(III)Nₓ species in a low- and medium-spin state, respectively (doublets D₁, D₂; see Table S1 for isomer shift and quadrupole splitting values) in all catalysts except Fe₂d. In the case of Fe₁d₁₀, the spectra could be fitted with two sextets assigned to α-Fe and iron carbide Fe₃C, one singlet assigned to γ-Fe and the two doublets D₁ and D₂. The Mössbauer parameters for the sextets and the singlet are indeed characteristic for such Fe structures. The doublets are much more intense in the spectrum of Fe₁₀w (Figure 2b as compared to 2a), highlighting the differences between the wet and dry homogenization methods. Formation of Fe crystalline structures is further decreased by decreasing the Fe content: the spectrum of Fe₀5d is fitted with only D₁ and D₂. Subjecting Fe₀5d to an additional pyrolysis step in NH₃ (Fe₀5d-950) did not change noticeably the Fe speciation, but an additional doublet D₃ accounting for only 3% of the total intensity is observed and could be assigned to crystalline FeₐNₓ or Feₐ₂N nanocrystals (Table S1). Last, the Mössbauer spectrum of Fe₂d clearly shows that this sample contains mainly iron carbide, as previously indicated by powder XRD, and no discernible amount of isolated FeₐN species. Table 1 summarizes the Fe content and speciation of the different samples, as obtained from X-ray absorption and Mössbauer spectroscopy, respectively.

**Table 1.** Fe content and Fe speciation within the different materials determined by ⁵⁷Fe Mössbauer spectroscopy (Samples listed by increasing absolute content of FeₐN moieties).
The EXAFS characterization of Fe\(_{0.5}\,\text{d}d\) revealed the absence of Fe-Fe backscattering signals, the signal at 2.3-2.4 Å being assigned to Fe-Fe backscattering from Fe\(_{0.5}\) and Fe\(_{0.5}\,\text{d}d\,\text{d}d\) in the first coordination sphere at 2.48 Å and Fe\(_{0.5}\,\text{d}d\) in the second coordination sphere at 2.87 Å and 2.7 Å in this iron nitride crystalline phase (present in minor amount), in agreement with the determined bond distance in Fe\(_{0.5}\,\text{d}d\). In contrast, the Fourier transform of the EXAFS function for Fe\(_{0.5}\,\text{d}d\) revealed the absence of Fe-Fe backscattering signals, the signal at ca. 2.7 Å being assigned to Fe-C backscattering (second coordination sphere of Fe in Fe\(_{0.5}\,\text{d}d\) moieties) rather than to a possible Fe-Fe interaction (e.g., due to the second coordination sphere in crystalline Fe structures).\(^{17}\) The EXAFS characterization of Fe\(_{0.5}\,\text{d}d\) therefore supports the previous conclusion that the two doublets seen in its Mössbauer spectrum can be associated with two different types of Fe\(_{0.5}\,\text{d}d\) moieties, representing a ferrous or ferric ion strongly coordinated with a light element (most probably nitrogen atoms) and covalently integrated in the carbon matrix.

Transmission electron microscopy (TEM) images confirmed Mössbauer and EXAFS analyses, as crystalline Fe nanoparticles are clearly observed in the materials containing higher Fe contents (Figure S2a) but not in Fe\(_{0.5}\,\text{d}d\) (Figure S2b).\(^{24,25}\)

For electrochemical characterization, a thin film of these materials was deposited on a carbon-based gas diffusion layer (GDL), using a Naion® binder (see supporting information). The binder did not modify significantly the morphology of the GDL, as shown by scanning electron microscopy (SEM) (Figure S2c).

### CO\(_2\) electrocatalytic reduction

The electrocatalytic activity of the materials supported on GDL for CO\(_2\) reduction was probed by linear sweep voltammetry (LSV) in CO\(_2\)-saturated 0.5 M NaHCO\(_3\) solutions. Catalytic waves were observed for all Fe-containing materials but not for the control Fe\(_{0.5}\,\text{d}d\) material (Figure 3). Onset potentials allow us identifying two groups of materials, with Fe\(_{0.5}\,\text{d}d\), Fe\(_{0.5}\,\text{d}d\) and Fe\(_{0.5}\,\text{d}d\,\text{d}d\)-950 characterized by low onset potentials of -0.3 V vs. RHE (190 mV overpotential for CO\(_2\)/CO), and Fe\(_{0.5}\,\text{d}d\) and Fe\(_{0.5}\,\text{d}d\) characterized by high onset potentials of -0.5 V vs. RHE. Furthermore, below the onset potential, current densities increased more rapidly with decreasing potential in the case of the second group. This supports the idea that these two set of materials catalyze different reactions, as will be evidenced later.

![Figure 3: LSV of metal-free Fe\(_{0.5}\,\text{d}d\) (orange), Fe\(_{0.5}\,\text{d}d\) (green), Fe\(_{0.5}\,\text{d}d\) (cyan), Fe\(_{0.5}\,\text{d}d\) (red), Fe\(_{0.5}\,\text{d}d\)-950 (black) and Fe\(_{0.5}\,\text{d}d\) (blue) in CO\(_2\)-saturated 0.5 M NaHCO\(_3\) aqueous solutions.](image-url)
In addition, for all catalysts, CO production rate reaches a maximum at -0.8 V vs. RHE (Figure S5), indicative of similar active sites for CO production in all catalysts.

![Figure 4](image)

**Figure 4.** Faradaic yield for CO (a) and H₂ (b) formation after 5 minutes CPE during CO₂ reduction in CO₂-saturated 0.5 M NaHCO₃ using Fe₀.5d (black), Fe₀.5d-950 (blue), Fe₁.0d (red), Fe₁.0w (cyan) and Fe₂.0d (green).

It should be noted that when electrolysis using Fe₀.5d electrode was carried out in the absence of CO₂ (N₂-saturated 0.5 M NaHCO₃ solution), H₂ was the sole product (FY 100%) from -0.3 to -1.0 V vs RHE. This demonstrates that CO formation is intimately linked to CO₂ reduction, and excludes the possible formation of CO as a result of the decomposition or transformation of the carbon structure from GDL or from the catalyst themselves. As shown in Figure S6, CH₄ was also observed as a minor product during electrolyses. The highest FY for CH₄ (up to 1.5%) was obtained with the Fe₀.5 electrodes at -1.0V vs. RHE.

The ratio of FeN₄ moieties to Fe-based nanoparticles in these materials therefore seems to control the selectivity for CO formation relative to hydrogen evolution. This is clearly demonstrated in Figure 5, showing an increased CO/H₂ ratio with increased relative content of FeN₄ moieties. The sharp drop in CO/H₂ ratio when the relative content of FeN₄ is < 97% can be assigned to the lower Tafel slope for H₂ evolution than for CO₂ reduction to CO. A small relative content of Fe nanoparticles can thus lead to a high yield of H₂ formation. While it is unclear whether all or only some Fe-based crystalline structures catalyze the H₂ evolution, the identification of the latter as H₂ evolution sites is in line with recent reports on the H₂ evolution activity in acid medium of Fe particles protected by a thin graphitic shell.²⁹,³⁰

![Figure 5](image)

**Figure 5.** CO/H₂ ratio of the gas blend formed after 5 minutes of electrolysis at -0.5 V vs RHE of aqueous solution of CO₂ (0.1 M NaHCO₃) as a function of the relative content of FeN₄ sites over the total iron content in the materials.

In addition, the selectivity of the reaction towards CO formation could be further improved using less concentrated electrolyte (Figure 6), in agreement with a recent report.³¹ This led to a FY for CO of 91% at -0.6 V vs. RHE using Fe₀.5d in 0.1 M NaHCO₃, however at the expense of a lower current density and CO production rate (7.5 mA.cm⁻² and 2.9 nmol CO.s⁻¹ in 0.5 M NaHCO₃ vs. 4.5 mA.cm⁻² and 2.1 nmol CO.s⁻¹ in 0.1 M NaHCO₃, Figure S7).

A recently reported Fe-N-C catalyst prepared by a different route, via multi-pyrolysis and multi acid leaching of an Fe salt, polyaniline and Ketjenblack, displayed a selectivity for CO₂ reduction to CO of ca. 80% at -0.6 V vs RHE in 0.1 M KHCO₃ (Fig. 4e in Ref 15). That material contains 83 % FeN₄ sites,³²,³³ and its selectivity for CO is hence in good agreement with those reported here and with the identification by Varela et al of Metal-N₄ moieties as the active site for selective CO₂ to CO reduction. A larger difference in selectivity was however observed at -0.8 V vs RHE: 60 % FY was measured for Fe₀.5d in the present study while ca. 38 % FY was observed for the Fe-N-C sample in Ref. 15, both measured in 0.1 M bicarbonate electrolyte. In view of the present study, we propose that these differences can be due to the presence of a minor fraction of Fe crystalline structures in the latter, as confirmed by the Mössbauer spectrum.³²,³³
proved excellent catalysts for catalytic CO potentials using Fe.

Finally, in order to assess the stability of the best material for CO reduction, a longer electrolysis experiment was carried out at -0.6 V vs. RHE using \( \text{Fe}_0.5 \) in aqueous NaHCO\(_3\) electrolytes with molarities of 0.1 M (square), 0.5 M (triangle), 1.0 M (circle).

As shown in Figure S8, the current density remained stable at ca 6 mA cm\(^{-2}\) during 6 h, and CO production rate maintained steady at 25 nmol s\(^{-1}\).

CONCLUSION

Fe-N-C materials recently appeared as promising materials for CO reduction and the parameters chosen for their synthesis appear critical, since such materials are generally heterogeneous in terms of Fe speciation. In an effort to direct their synthesis towards the most selective materials, we have investigated here the effect of the Fe speciation on the catalytic selectivity by a combined structural and catalytic characterization of a broad variety of Fe-N-C materials. We clearly identified isolated FeN\(_2\) sites as the critical catalytic species for the selective electrochemical reduction of CO to CO. From that study, the Fe\(_0.5\) material proved the most effective and selective catalyst, producing CO with high FY (up to 90%), low overpotentials (190 mV overpotential relative to the formal equilibrium potential for CO/CO in 0.5 M NaHCO\(_3\) aqueous solution) and sustaining long-term electrolysis. Interestingly these sites are reminiscent of soluble Fe-porphyrins which proved excellent catalysts for catalytic CO\(_2\) conversion to CO\(_2\). In contrast, materials carrying metallic Fe particles (or iron carbides) are mainly active for proton reduction under similar conditions. This can be easily exploited to generate materials producing a gas mixture with a targeted H\(_2\)/CO ratio.

Controlling this ratio could be critical for use of the H\(_2\)/CO gas mixture in Fischer Tropsch processes, different ratio being required depending on the catalyst used for the downstream chemical transformation of CO into various products.

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ASSOCIATED CONTENT

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(27) It should be noted that the average particle size depends on the total Fe content: small Fe particles of 10-20 nm size covered with a 6-7 nm graphitic layers were observed in Fe$_{1.0}$$^{17}$W (see ref. 25) while a bimodal size distribution with small (10-20 nm) and large particles (50-100 nm was observed for Fe$_{4.0}$d (Figure S2a). This bimodal distribution might be related to the presence of two types of crystalline Fe species in Fe$_{4.0}$d: iron carbide and gamma-Fe (see Figure 2e).

(28) At all potentials the current density is stable during the 5 minutes of the experiment (Figure S3).


(32) Mössbauer spectra of that material was investigated when using that material for O$_2$ reduction (Ref 31). It revealed the presence of a sextet amounting to 17% of the total absorption area of the spectrum, assigned to magnetic Fe oxide nanoparticles and hence 83% of FeN$_4$ species.


