The synthesis and electrochemical characterization of mesoporous carbon based on MF resin and MnO$_2$ composite

Min-Young Cho$^{a,b}$, Sun-Min Park$^a$, Byung Hyun Choi$^b$, Jae-Won Lee$^c$ and Kwang Chul Roh$^{a,*}$

$^a$KICET, 233-5 Gasan-dong, Guemcheon-Gu, Seoul 153-801, Korea
$^b$School of Advanced Materials Science and Engineering, Yonsei Univ., Seoul 120-746, Korea
$^c$Department of Energy Engineering, Dankook Univ., Cheonan 330-714, Korea

To improve the electrical conductivity of MnO$_2$, the composite material of mesoporous carbon and MnO$_2$ was synthesized. The mesoporous carbon was prepared by a polymerization-induced colloid aggregation method (PICA) using melamine formaldehyde resin as the carbon precursor and fumed silica (14 nm) as a hard template. The composite of mesoporous carbon and MnO$_2$ was prepared by a redox reaction between KMnO$_4$ and oxygen on the surface of carbon. The synthesized mesoporous carbon has a high specific surface area (~ 1500 m$^2$ g$^{-1}$) and an average pore size as large as 7 nm. Electrochemical properties of the mesoporous carbon-MnO$_2$ composite were elucidated by cyclic voltammograms and galvanostatic charge-discharge in 1.0 M Na$_2$SO$_4$ electrolyte. A specific capacitance of 128 F g$^{-1}$ was obtained at a current density of 0.1 A g$^{-1}$.

Keywords: Pseudocapacitor, Supercapacitor, Porous carbon materials, MnO$_2$ composite.

Introduction

Electrochemical capacitors (ECs) have been known for many years, but only recently are emerging as an attractive energy-storage/conversion device for future use in hybrid electric vehicles in combination with rechargeable batteries or fuel cells [1]. The ECs are classified into two types according to their charge storage principle [2]. The first is an electrical double-layer capacitor (EDLC) using activated carbon (AC) with a high surface area and the other is a pseudocapacitor using metal oxides and conducting polymers.

Various metal oxides, such as RuO$_2$, IrO$_2$, NiO$_2$, CoO, SnO$_2$, and MnO$_2$, were used as electrode materials [3-7]. Among these materials, amorphous hydrated ruthenium oxide exhibits ideal pseudocapacitive behavior, remarkably high specific capacitance (as high as 700 - 1000 F g$^{-1}$ [3]), and excellent reversibility. However, the high cost and the toxicity to the environment have limited its practical application. Therefore, much attention has been increased for the demand on the relatively cheap and environmentally friendly materials.

MnO$_2$ appears to be a promising material due to its superior electrochemical performance, environmentally benign nature, and low cost [8, 9]. However, the relatively low electrical conductivities of pristine MnO$_2$, to a great extent, limit their high rate performance [10, 11, 20]. The intrinsic MnO$_2$ is generally decorated with conducting agents, such as carbons and conducting polymers, in order to enhance their electrical conductivities.

In this work, the composite material of mesoporous carbon (MC) and MnO$_2$ was prepared to improve the electrical conductivity of MnO$_2$. Melamine formaldehyde resin was used in order to obtain MC with a facile mesoporous structure through a polymerization-induced colloid aggregation (PICA) method. MC/MnO$_2$ composite was prepared by a redox reaction between KMnO$_4$ and oxygen-containing groups on MC surface. The system of electrochemical capacitors consists of the composite material (MC/MnO$_2$) as the positive electrode and AC as the negative electrode. The microstructure and electrochemical properties of the synthesized MC and MC/MnO$_2$ were evaluated.

Experimental

Materials preparation

The MC was prepared by a polymerization-induced colloid aggregation (PICA) method [12], using melamine as a carbon precursor and fumed silica as a hard template. In the typical synthesis of melamine formaldehyde resin (MF)/silica composites, 3.15 g melamine and 5.0 ml formaldehyde (36 wt%) were first added into 12.5 ml deionizer water and stirred for 20 minutes at 75 °C to obtain a clear solution. The resulting precursor solution was cooled to 40 °C and poured into 30 ml fumed silica colloid solution (5.0 wt%) under stirring at 40 °C and then the pH value of the mixtures was adjusted to 4.5 using 2 M HCl solution; the mixtures were kept for 3 hours to obtain the MF/silica composites. These composites were collected by filtration, washed...
with water, and dried in air at 60 °C. The composites were firstly cured in air at 180 °C for 24 hours and then carbonized under a high purity nitrogen atmosphere up to 800 °C for 2 hours. Subsequently, 20 wt% HF solution was used to etch the silica in the resulting carbon/silica composites for 24 hours. Finally, after washing, the products were dried in air at 120 °C for 2 hours.

**MC/MnO$_2$ composite**

0.2 g of KMnO$_4$ was dissolved in 30 ml of distilled water, and then 0.3 g of MC was added to it and heated to 70 °C under stirring for 4 h. The suspension was filtered, washed several times with distilled water, and dried at 100 °C for 24 hours in a vacuum oven.

**Structure characterizations and electrochemical tests**

The morphology of MC/MnO$_2$ composite was examined using a scanning electron microscope (FE-SEM, Jeol JSM-6700F). The crystalline phases were analyzed with X-ray diffraction (XRD, Rigaku D/Max-2500/PC). The Brunauer, Emmett, and Teller (BET) method was used to measure the surface areas and pore volumes of samples (Belsorp-Mini II, Belsorp, Japan). The carbon content of MC/MnO$_2$ composite was determined by thermogravimetric analysis (TGA).

The electrochemical properties of the active material were examined using a coin cell (CR 2032). The positive electrode was made by coating the slurry of MC/MnO$_2$ on a titanium disc current collector. The negative electrode was prepared by mixing the composite material, Super-P carbon black, and polyvinylidenefluoride (PVDF) in a mass ratio of 80 : 10 : 10. After stirring the mixtures for 1 h in N-methylpyrrolidone, the resulting slurry was coated on a titanium disc current collector. The negative electrode used MSP20 (Kansai Coke & Chemicals, Japan, resin) activated carbon as an active material. The separator and electrolyte were TF 4035 (NKK, Japan, resin) and a 1.0 M Na$_2$SO$_4$ solution, respectively. Galvanostatic charge and discharge tests of the cell were carried out at current densities of 0.1 ~ 1 Ag$^{-1}$ between 0.05 V and 0.85 V. Cyclic voltammetry (CV) was carried out at a scan rate of 2 ~ 20 mVs$^{-1}$ between 0.05 V and 0.85 V. Electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) was recorded by applying a low amplitude voltage of 5 mV root mean square to the system at its open circuit potential at frequencies from 100 kHz to 0.01 Hz. Galvanostatic charge and discharge, EIS, and CV were characterized using a potentiostat (EC-Lab, France).

**Results and Discussion**

**Analysis of carbon content and structures**

The SEM image of the as-synthesized MC is shown in Fig. 1(a). The MC seems to be porous, with pore sizes ranging from micrometer to nanometer range. The presence of nanoporosity was confirmed by BET measurements and N$_2$ adsorption data (Fig. 1(b)). The pore sizes of this sample calculated from desorption branch is mainly concentrated near 7.4 nm. Its BET surface area and total pore volume are 1531 m$^2$g$^{-1}$ and 2.85 cm$^3$g$^{-1}$, respectively.

The SEM image of the as-synthesized MC/MnO$_2$ composite is shown in Fig. 2 (a). This MnO$_2$ powder consists of many agglomerated nano-particles (size: about 10 nm) in the MC. The carbon content of the product was determined by thermogravimetric analysis (TGA) in oxygen at 500 °C. The TGA curve of the prepared powder is illustrated in Fig. 2 (b). The weight loss from room temperature to 250 °C can be attributed to the dehydration of physically adsorbed and chemically bonded water molecules. The weight loss between 250 °C and 400 °C is assigned to the oxidation of carbon. TGA result confirms that the weight fraction of carbon in the prepared composite is about 50 wt%.

Fig. 3 illustrates the XRD pattern of the synthesized MC/MnO$_2$. The broad peaks indicate that the sample is composed of nano-particles. Peaks at 2$\theta$= 26, 37, and 65 ° are observed. Among the peaks, the peaks at 2$\theta$= 26 and 37 ° are assigned to $\alpha$-MnO$_2$ and 65 ° to $\alpha$-MnO$_2$ [13, 14], which indicates that the sample is a mixture of $\alpha$- and $\gamma$-MnO$_2$. MnO$_2$ exists in various crystallographic forms, such as $\alpha$, $\beta$, $\gamma$, $\delta$, $\lambda$, etc., depending on how MnO$_2$ octahedra subunits are interlinked. Among these different crystallographic forms, $\alpha$- and $\delta$-forms of MnO$_2$ are found to be more suitable than the rest, because of the availability of sufficient gap in the structures for doping/undoping of cations [15]. Also, $\gamma$-MnO$_2$ is known to exhibit considerable
electrochemical performance [16].

**Electrochemical characteristics**

The carbons containing nitrogen were effective in adsorbing acidic materials such as H$_2$SO$_4$, H$_2$S, and HCl [17]. Therefore, the MC based on melamine resin is almost not electrochemically active in neutral electrolyte. However, mesoporous structured carbon can be easily prepared from melamine formaldehyde resin. Therefore, the MC is only used to improve the electrical conductivity of MnO$_2$ without any contribution to capacitance.

The capacitance behavior of MnO$_2$ is identified by reversible redox process, involving Mn$^{4+}$ followed by surface insertion/deinsertion of cations:

\[
n\text{MnO}_2 + M^{n+} + ne^{-} \leftrightarrow (\text{MnOO})nM
\]  

where M$^{n+}$ represents a cation [18].

Fig. 4(a) shows respective CV curves of the prepared MC/MnO$_2$ composite measured at a scan rate ranging from 2 to 10 mVs$^{-1}$ between 0.05 and 0.85 V in 1.0 M Na$_2$SO$_4$ electrolyte solution. It can be clearly seen that there are no obvious redox peaks in the working potential range and the CV curves obtained at different scan rates present quite good mirror images with respect to the zero-current line and symmetric I-E response. As the oxide is mainly amorphous with a short range ordering, it is likely that the insertion of cations takes place dominantly at the surface of the MnO$_2$ particles. The assumption of surface process is supported by CV, without diffusion controlled redox current peaks [19].

In addition, galvanostatic constant current charge-discharge curves at various current densities were performed from 0.05 V to 0.85 V; respective curves are shown in Fig.4 (b). Specific capacitance was calculated by [9]:

\[
C = I \cdot (\Delta T) / (\Delta V) \cdot (X)
\]  

where I, T, V and X denote current density, discharge time, potential range in discharge, and the weight of the active material, respectively. The specific capacitance of MC/MnO$_2$ composite is 128, 93, and 77 Fg$^{-1}$ at 0.1, 0.5, and 1 Ag$^{-1}$, respectively.

Fig. 5 shows the Nyquists plots of the experimental impedance data. All the measured impedance spectra are similar in shape, with a semicircle at the higher-frequency region and a spike at the lower-frequency region. The semicircle represents the charge transfer resistance (RCT) (i.e., the kinetic resistance to charge transfer at the electrode-electrolyte interface). The spike in the lower-frequency region represents the
Warburg impedance ($Z_w$) associated with the diffusion of cations into the particles. The RCT values are found to be 33 ohm for the MC/MnO$_2$. Other papers that conducted this experiment with MnO$_2$ only show more than 100 ohm of the RCT value for the resistance measurement. [19] Therefore, the electrochemical analysis demonstrated that MC/MnO$_2$ composite had good capacitive behavior due to the electrical conductivity improvement by mesoporous carbon.

**Conclusions**

The MC with average pore size of 7 nm, pore volume of 2.85 cm$^3$g$^{-1}$, and BET specific surface area of 1531 m$^2$g$^{-1}$, have been successfully synthesized by PICA method. The MnO$_2$ of MC/MnO$_2$ composite was identified by X-ray diffraction to be a mixture of α- and γ- MnO$_2$. MnO$_2$ powder consists of many agglomerated nano-particles dispersed in the MC. Electrochemical properties of MC/MnO$_2$ composite were studied by CV, galvanostatic charge/discharge in 1.0 M NaSO$_4$ aqueous solution. The CV curves obtained at different scan rates present roughly good mirror images with respect to the zero-current line and symmetric I-E response. The specific capacitance of MC/MnO$_2$ composite is 128, 93, and 77 Fg$^{-1}$, at 0.1, 0.5, and 1 Ag$^{-1}$, respectively. Also, the RCT values are found to be 33 ohm. Analysis of CV, galvanostatic charge/discharge, and EIS confirm that the electrochemical properties of MnO$_2$ were improved by MC.

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