Chemical Engineering Journal 287 (2016) 523–528

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Chemical Engineering Journal

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/cej

Impacts of microaeration on the anaerobic digestion of corn straw and the microbial community structure

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HIGHLIGHTS

- The effect of limited oxygen daily supplied on the AD of corn straw was studied.
- Daily oxygen supplied could obviously improve the AD performance of corn straw.
- Specific methanogenic activity under microaerobic condition improved slightly.
- The microbial community structure shift could explain the better AD performance.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 27 August 2015
Received in revised form 16 November 2015
Accepted 21 November 2015
Available online 2 December 2015

Keywords:
Anaerobic digestion
Microaerobic condition
Microbial community structure
Specific methanogenic activity

ABSTRACT

Conventionally, oxygen is considered as inhibit factor of anaerobic digestion (AD). However, recent studies have demonstrated that AD performance could be enhanced by introducing limited amounts of oxygen (or air) directly into the anaerobic digester or during pretreatment step. In this study, impacts of microaeration on the anaerobic digestion of corn straw and the microbial community structure were investigated. Results showed that limited air introduced into fermentation system could improve the methane yield of corn straw. Maximum cumulative methane yield of 216.8 ml/g $VS_{substrate}$ and maximum VS removal efficiency of 54.3% were simultaneously obtained under microaerobic condition with the air load of 12.5 ml/L_R per day, which were 16.5% and 10.3% higher than those of sample under anaerobic condition, respectively. Compared to anaerobic condition, the relative abundances of phylum *Firmicutes*, class *Clostridia* and order *Clostridiales*, which associated with hydrolysis process of AD were raised under microaerobic condition. In addition, the relative abundances of oxytolerant *Methanosarcina* and *Methanobacterium* were both doubled under microaerobic condition. Accordingly, specific methanogenic activity (SMA) under microaerobic condition improved slightly. The microbial community shift might be the reason for improved AD performance under microaerobic condition.

1. Introduction

Anaerobic digestion (AD) has been widely applied in treating of organic waste as well as producing methane energy [1,2]. Due to the abundance and high carbohydrate content, corn straw has been demonstrated to be a potential substrate for methane production in AD [3].

Conventionally, AD is considered to be a four-step biological process. The solubilization of complex particulate organic compounds into simple soluble compounds such as volatile fatty acids (VFAs) was accounted as hydrolysis and acidification. They are followed by the acidogenesis step which converts VFAs to acetate and hydrogen gas that will in turn be consumed by methanogens to produce methane in the final step of the AD process [4,5]. During AD of cellulosic substrate like corn straw, hydrolysis is generally regarded as rate-limiting step [5,6]. Recent studies have demonstrated the hydrolysis of AD could be enhanced by introducing limited amounts of oxygen (or air) directly into the anaerobic digester or during a pretreatment step [7,8]. On the one hand, facultative bacteria have a quick grow rate, consequently, more cellulose and protease hydrolytic enzymes will be produced, which will lead to higher hydrolysis rate [9,10]. On the other hand, methanogens were demonstrated to have several mechanisms to survive and

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cej.2015.11.070
1385-8947/

function under microaerobic condition with no or minor inhibitory effects [11–14].

Microaeration has been used during anaerobic digestion process in several studies. However, different results were obtained. During studying the effect of microaerobic condition on the degradation kinetics of cellulose, Diaz et al. [15] found limited oxygen supply did not substantially affect the maximum methane production and the hydrolysis constant. However, a shorter lag-phase was found in the microaerobic assays. Ramos et al. [16] also demonstrated oxygen supplied did not have a significant impact on the digestion performance of sewage sludge. During the anaerobic digestion of primary sludge, Johansen et al. [17] reported microaeration could only enhance primary sludge hydrolysis. Conversely, Mshandete et al. [18] reported nine hours of microaerobic pretreatment prior to AD of sisal pulp improved the methane yield for 26%. According to Jang et al. [19], using thermophilic aerobic digestion as biological pretreatment of sewage sludge significantly improved the total volatile suspended solid reduction and methane production rate. In AD of the compound of brown water and food waste, Lim and Wang [4] obtained 10–21% higher methane yield at oxygen load of 37.5 mL O_2/L_R per d during initial four days of AD. In our previous study, thermophilic microaerobic pretreatment before anaerobic digestion of corn straw at the oxygen loads of 5 mL/g $VS_{substrate}$ demonstrated 16.2% higher methane yield [20]. In addition, a secondary thermophilic microaerobic treatment at the 22th day of anaerobic digestion further improved the methane for 10.6% [21].

Microaerobic pretreatment has been proved to be an effective pretreatment method in several studies. However, the effects of continuously oxygen supplied during AD process on the AD performance of corn straw and the microbial community structure were less reported. In this study, the effects of continuous oxygen supplied during AD process on the AD performance of corn straw were investigated. In addition, the microbial community structures and specific methanogenic activities were also studied to reveal the reason for the improved AD performance of corn straw under microaerobic condition.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Substrate and inoculum

Corn straw collected from corn field of Pingdu (Shandong Province) was used as substrate. The TS (total solid) and VS (volatile solid) of corn straw were 91.9 ± 0.5% and 89.5 ± 0.5% (based on TS) (TS and VS were determined according to standard methods [22]), respectively. Before further use, corn straw was chopped and sieved to size of less than 1.0 cm by 1.0 cm sieve.

Active sludge with respectively TS and VS of 2.6 ± 0.3% and 52.7 ± 0.8% (based on TS) was collected from a local wastewater treatment plant (Tuandao Water Treatment Plant, Qingdao, Shandong Province, China). The collected active sludge was stored in refrigerator at 4 °C until further use.

2.2. Batch anaerobic digestion tests and oxygen supplied

Batch thermophilic (55 °C) anaerobic digestion tests were performed in duplicates. Before thermophilic anaerobic digestion, 5.8 g corn straw (wet weight) and 50 mL active sludge were mixed in bottles, and then nutrient solution was added to reach total volume of 0.2 L. The formula of nutrient solution was prepared according to Angelidaki et al. [23]. The bottles were flushed with N_2 for 5 min to replace the air and closed with rubber stoppers. Anaerobic digestion of corn straw was conducted in shaking water bath at 55 °C with 120 rpm.

Microaerobic conditions during thermophilic anaerobic digestion were attained by injecting air to the bottles with syringe. 0, 2.5, 5, 10, and 20 mL air at atmospheric pressure were injected daily into the bottles after biogas test to reach the air loads of 0, 12.5, 25, 50, and 100 mL/L_R-d (marked as T0, T1, T2, T3 and T4, respectively).

In this stage, biogas yield was measured daily by water replacement method. Methane concentration in biogas was also measured daily by gas chromatograph (SP 6890, Shandong Lunan Inc., China), equipped with a Porapak Q stainless steel column (180 cm long, 3 mm outer diameter) and a thermal conductivity detector. The temperatures of the injector, detector, and oven were 50, 100 and 100 °C, respectively. The carrier gas was argon.

2.3. Mathematical model analysis

In this study, the modified first order equation described as Diaz et al. [15] was used to estimate the hydrolysis constant (d^{-1}), which was written as:

$$P(t) = P_\infty \exp[1 - \exp(-k_H(t - L_p))]$$

where $P(t)$ cumulative methane yield (mL/g VS), P_∞ methane yield potential (mL/g VS), k_H is hydrolysis constant (d^{-1}), L_p is lag-phase time (d), t is elapsed time (d).

2.4. Specific methanogenic activity (SMA) tests

SMA tests were performed in triplicate in 300 mL bottles. During SMA tests, two substrates (sodium acetate and H_2/CO_2) were used for specific acetotrophic methanogenic activity (SAMA) and specific hydrogenotrophic methanogenic activity (SHMA) tests, respectively. During SMA tests, 160 mL nutrient solution and 40 mL fermentation broth were mixed in bottles to reach the working volume of 200 mL. Microaerobic condition during SMA test was obtained by daily 2.5 mL air injection to the bottles (marked as MO, using fermentation broth collected from T1 as inocula), SMA under anaerobic condition was marked as WO (using fermentation broth collected from T0 as inocula). For SAMA tests, each bottle was added with 0.6 g sodium acetate to reach the sodium acetate concentration of 3 g/L. The pH was adjusted to 7.0 with 2 M hydrochloric acid and 2 M sodium hydroxide. Then bottles were flushed with argon for 5 min to replace the air and closed with rubber stoppers. For SHMA tests, the pH was also adjusted to 7.0, and then bottles were closed with rubber stoppers and vacuumed, 100 mL H_2/CO_2 (4:1 v/v) was injected to each bottle. All the bottles were placed in a shaking water bath at 55 °C with 120 rpm. The methane yield was measured every 12 h with gas chromatograph (SP 6890, Shandong Lunan Inc., China) described as above.

2.5. Microbial community structure

10 mL of fermentation broth were collected from T0 and T1 with a syringe at the end of thermophilic anaerobic digestion and then stored in refrigerator (−80 °C) until further microbial community structure analysis.

Next generation sequencing library preparations and Illumina MiSeq sequencing were conducted at GENEWIZ, Inc. (Beijing, China). FastDNA® Spin Kit for Soil (CWBIO) was used for DNA extraction according to the manufacture's protocols. DNA samples were quantified using a Qubit 2.0 Fluorometer (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA) and DNA quality was checked on a 0.8% agarose gel. 5–50 ng DNA was used to generate amp icons using a MetaVx™ Library Preparation kit (GENEWIZ, Inc., South Plainfield, NJ, USA). A panel of proprietary primers was designed to anneal to the relatively conserved regions bordering V3 (variable V3 region