Bioresource Technology 100 (2009) 3293–3297

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Bioresource Technology

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

Bioconversion of lignocellulosic fraction of water-hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*) hemicellulose acid hydrolysate to ethanol by *Pichia stipitis*

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 25 July 2008
Received in revised form 11 February 2009
Accepted 13 February 2009
Available online 17 March 2009

Keywords:
Pichia stipitis
Water-hyacinth
Ethanol
Modeling
Hemicellulose acid hydrolysate

ABSTRACT

Fermentation of acid hydrolysate of water-hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*), a free floating aquatic plant has been investigated for ethanol production. The dilute acid treatment has been applied to utilize the maximum hemicellulosic content of the water-hyacinth. The goal of this work was to investigate, both experimentally and theoretically using mathematical tools, a fermentative system utilizing water-hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*) hemicellulose acid hydrolysate as a substrate for ethanol production using *Pichia stipitis*. It was found that 72.83% of xylose was converted to ethanol with a yield of 0.425 g_p/g_s and productivity of 0.176 g_p/L/h. An appropriate mathematical model was developed to explain theoretically the bioconversion of this hemicellulose acid hydrolysate to ethanol and the model was tested statistically to check the validity of the model.

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1. Introduction

Energy consumption has increased steadily over the last century as the world population has grown and more countries have become industrialized. Bioethanol, a renewable fuel is becoming increasingly important as a consequence of major concern for depleting oil reserves, rising crude oil prices and greenhouse effect (Sun and Cheng, 2002; Hu et al., 2008). Lignocellulosic feedstock is considered as an attractive raw material not only for the liquid transportation fuel but also for the production of chemicals and materials, i.e. the development of carbohydrate-based biorefineries (Herrera, 2006; Gray et al., 2006; Farrell et al., 2006) because of its availability in large quantities at low cost (Lynd, 1989; Parisi, 1989). Corn stover, wheat straw, sugar begasse, rice straw, rice hull, corn cob, oat hull, corn fiber, woodchip and cotton stalk have attracted the most interest of research (Chang et al., 2001; Chen and Liu, 2007; Esteghlalian et al., 1997; Moniruzzaman et al., 1997; Saha, 2003; Saha et al., 2005; Eklund and Zacchi, 1995; Jeffries, 2006; Sun and Chen, 2007).

Besides terrestrial plants, aquatic plants are also promising renewable resource. Aquatic plants have many advantages as they grow in water bodies without competing with arable lands for grains and vegetables; they are also used for water purification to extract nutrients and heavy metals. Especially, the vegetative form of free floating aquatic plants will facilitate their movement and harvest. Despite those advantages, no data on bioethanol production from aquatic plants are available except for water-hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*) (Kahlon and Kumar, 1987; Nigam, 2002). Water-hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*), which is widely prevalent aquatic weed in India having high content of hemicellulose (35–55% of dry weight), exceptionally fast growing plant and can provide hemicellulosic sugars for bioconversion to fuel ethanol.

The production of fuel ethanol from biomass involves hydrolysis, fermentation and distillation. The hydrolysate contain varying amounts of monosaccharides, both pentose and hexose, and a broad range of substances either derived from raw material or resulting as reaction products from sugar and lignin degradation. Many of these substances may have an inhibitory effect on the microorganisms in subsequent fermentation steps (Nigam, 2002).

The fermentation organism must be able to ferment all monosaccharides present and in addition, withstand potential inhibitors in the hydrolysates. The most commonly used ethanol producers, *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*, cannot ferment pentoses, which may constitute up to 45% of the raw material. Among the xylose fermenting yeasts *Pichia stipitis* has shown promise for industrial applications because it ferment xylose rapidly with a high ethanol yield and apparently produces no xylitol (Dominguez et al., 1993). This study investigated ethanol production from both the defined lab media i.e. synthetic hydrolysate media and pretreated-detoxified water-hyacinth hemicellulose acid hydrolysate using *P. stipitis* NCIM-3497 and the experimental facts explained by the proposed model.

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doi:10.1016/j.biortech.2009.02.023

2. Methods

2.1. Microorganism and maintenance

Pichia stipitis NCIM-3497 used in this study was procured from the National Collection for Industrial Microorganisms, National Chemical Laboratory, Pune, India was grown and maintained at 30 ± 0.2 and 4 °C, respectively, on agar slants. The medium used for inoculum preparation contained (g/L): D-xylose 50; glucose 5; yeast extract 3; malt extract 3 and peptone 5, pH 5.0 ± 0.2. The media were sterilized by autoclaving at 121 °C for 15 min.

2.2. Production medium

2.2.1. Substrate preparation

Fresh water-hyacinth plant with long stem were collected and washed to remove adhering dirt and chopped in small pieces, dried, and powdered. The average composition of water-hyacinth was; total solids (TSs): 5.2–7.8 (% of wet weight), moisture 92.6–95 (% of wet weight), volatile solids (as % of TSs): 4.4–6.7 (84.0–85.9), hemicellulose (as % of TSs): 49.2 ± 0.024, cellulose (as % of TSs): 18.4 ± 0.018, lignin (as % of TSs): 3.55 ± 0.005, crude protein (as % of TSs): 12.60 ± 0.018.

2.2.2. Hydrolysate preparation

Hydrolysate was prepared by refluxing the dried powder with 10 volumes of (2% v/v) sulfuric acid for a period of 7 h at room temperature, in conical flasks, stirred at 250 rpm. Hydrolysate (liquid portion) was filtered to remove the unhydrolysed solid residue, and washed with warm water (60 °C). The filtrate and washings were pooled together.

2.2.3. Detoxification of acid hydrolysate

The acid hydrolysate (1 L) was heated to 100 °C, held at that temperature for 15 min to remove or reduce the concentration of volatile components. Any loss in volume during boiling was replaced with heated distilled water. The acid hydrolysate was then overlimed with solid $Ca(OH)_2$ up to pH 10.0, in combination with 0.1% sodium sulfite, filtered to remove insolubles and then reacidified to pH 6.0 ± 0.2, with 1 N sulfuric acid. The filtrate was concentrated under vacuum at 60 °C to achieve (5–6% w/v) of xylose concentration. The composition of the acid hydrolysate was then determined and was found as follows (g/L): D-xylose 54; D-glucose 3.5; L-arabinose 4.5; D-galactose 2.2; and D-mannose 3.3. Since the main fermentable sugar found was xylose, therefore, the acid hydrolysate is referred as hemicellulose acid hydrolysate hence forth. The resulting solution was stored at −10 °C for further use as substrate.

2.2.4. Water-hyacinth hemicellulose acid hydrolysate medium

Fermentation medium containing (g/L): yeast extract 1; $(NH_4)HPO_4$ 2; $(NH_4)SO_4$ 1; $MgSO_4 \cdot 7H_2O$ 0.25; and trace element solution 1 ml/L was supplemented with detoxified hemicellulose acid hydrolysate (Section 2.2.3). The trace element solution contained (g/L): $CuSO_4 \cdot H_2O$ 2.5; $FeCl_3 \cdot 6H_2O$ 2.7; $MnSO_4 \cdot H_2O$ 1.7; $Na_2Mo_2O_4 \cdot 2H_2O$ 2.42; $ZnSO_4 \cdot 7H_2O$ 2.87; $CaCl_2 \cdot 6H_2O$ 2.4 and medium pH was adjusted to 6.0 ± 0.2 with concentrated H_2SO_4 (98%) 0.5 ml/L.

2.2.5. Batch fermentation

Batch fermentation was conducted in a 500 ml conical flask with a working volume of 125 ml. The fermentation medium was inoculated with 5% v/v inoculum (20 h culture, 1×10^7 cells/ml). The fermentation temperature was kept constant at 30 ± 0.2 °C in an Incubation shaker (Lab Therm Kuhner, Switzerland). The broth was kept under agitation at 200 rpm. Samples were taken at regular time intervals during fermentations to determine the concentrations of cell mass, ethanol and residual sugars in the broth. All experiments were carried out in duplicate.

2.2.6. Recovery of ethanol

Fermented broth was diluted with water and distilled in a distillation assembly at 79 ± 1 °C. Temperature was controlled to prevent mixing of higher boiling distillate like water in the broth.

3. Analytical methods

Total solids (TSs), volatile solids, moisture and crude protein in water-hyacinth were determined according to standards (AOAC, 1975). Cellulose, hemicellulose and lignin contents were determined by the detergent extraction method (Robertson and van Soest, 1981).

3.1. Biomass estimation

Biomass growth was measured turbidometrically at 600 nm by diluting samples in the ratio 1:5 with 1 N HCl (to dissolve calcium salts), using a cuvette with 1 cm light path in Double Beam UV–vis Spectrophotometer (Electronic Corporation of India Ltd.) and culture dry weight was measured by centrifugation and drying at 105 °C, until no weight change between consecutive measurements was observed.

3.2. Sugar estimation

Total reducing sugar was estimated by using dinitrosalicylic acid (DNS) reagent (Miller, 1959), while pentose sugar was estimated by Roe and Rice method (Roe and Rice, 1948).

3.3. Ethanol estimation

Ethanol produced during the fermentation process was measured colorimetrically using potassium dichromate ($K_2Cr_2O_7$) reagent.

3.4. Software

The calculation of the parameters of the mathematical model and the statistical analysis followed by was done with the help of software package "Polymath" version 6.10 (CACHE Corporation, USA).

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Water-hyacinth hemicellulose acid hydrolysate preparation

Dilute sulfuric acid hydrolysis (2% v/v) under reflux was very effective in releasing good amount of sugar from water-hyacinth. After 7 h of reflux, reducing sugar yield was 18.8 g/100 g of dry biomass of which pentose sugar constituted 13.3 g/100 g, remaining was other reducing sugars. All these sugars were derived primarily from hemicellulosic fraction of water-hyacinth. The other reducing sugar yield was low, showing that cellulose remains practically unhydrolyzed. Dilute acid at moderate temperature effectively removes and recovers most of the hemicellulose as dissolved sugars (Lu et al., 2008). As the structure of cellulose is more complex than the hemicellulosic fraction in the plant material, therefore, requires much severe conditions for their degradation. Also water-hyacinth contains relatively high hemicellulose content compared to cellulose, this is fairly agreed with the data reported by Klass and Ghosh (1981). Besides sugars, the hydrolysate contained different and

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