



Ormosil-coated conjugated polymers for the detection of explosives in aqueous environments

Ross N. Gillanders, Iain A. Campbell, James M.E. Glackin, Ifor D.W. Samuel*,
Graham A. Turnbull*

Organic Semiconductor Centre, SUPA, School of Physics & Astronomy, University of St Andrews, Fife KY16 9SS, Scotland, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

A fluorescence-based sensor for detecting explosives, based on a conjugated polymer coated with an ormosil layer, has been developed for use in aqueous environments. The conjugated polymer Super Yellow was spin-coated onto glass substrates prior to a further spin-coating of an MTEOS/TFP-TMOS-based ormosil film, giving an inexpensive, solution-based barrier material for ruggedization of the polymer to an aqueous environment. The sensors showed good sensitivity to 2,4-DNT in the aqueous phase at micromolar and millimolar concentrations, and also showed good recovery of fluorescence when the explosive was removed.

1. Introduction

Conjugated polymers are highly-emissive materials commonly used as the active layer in devices including organic LEDs (OLEDs), polymer lasers, and optical sensors [1–6]. Due to photo-oxidation and mechanical degradation of the polymers, OLEDs and lasers normally require encapsulation in epoxy layers to prevent ingress of water and oxygen, and so extend the operational lifetime. For sensor layers, this approach is not suitable since the layer requires direct contact with the analyte. Optical sensing films are often needed to operate in aggressive environments, including, for instance, water flows or humid outdoor environments. However, to deploy these polymer materials, a robust, optically clear, porous layer would be necessary to allow analyte ingress while protecting the polymer layer itself.

Sol-gel materials are well-known matrices in optical sensor fabrication, due to advantages in solution-processing, optical clarity, suitability for aqueous deployment and long-term stability. Organically modifying the sol-gel with a precursor to create an organically-modified silicate (ormosil) can, amongst other benefits, increase the hydrophobicity of the sol-gel [7,8]. These properties make sol-gels attractive coating layers for the polymers to mitigate potential weaknesses in real-world deployment. By coating the polymer films with an ormosil layer, the film could allow ingress of the explosive molecules while protecting the more sensitive polymer from water.

Conjugated polymers are particularly suited for optical sensing of nitroaromatic molecules for explosives detection [9–16]. When the polymer absorbs light an exciton is formed which emits fluorescence;

but electron transfer from the polymer to a sorbed nitroaromatic dissociates the exciton and so can be observed by a decrease in light emission. Whilst these materials show good sensitivity to explosives in the vapour phase, practical detection of these compounds in the aqueous phase is more challenging, particularly for the photophysical and mechanical stability of the polymers in such environments. Other methods, such as Surface Plasmon Resonance (SPR) [17], Raman Spectroscopy [18] and electrochemical sensors [19,20] show good performance in aqueous nitroaromatic detection. However, an easily-processed, optically-clear, and robust protective layer for the conjugated polymers would be of high importance and a promising tool for optical explosives sensing, since the sensor itself can be sensitive, disposable, and reversible. In this paper we demonstrate a hybrid thin-film sensor, made from a conjugated polymer and sol-gel barrier, which can sensitively and reversibly detect the explosive molecule 2,4-DNT in water.

2. Experimental

2.1. Materials

Triethoxymethylsilane (MTEOS) ($\text{CH}_3\text{Si}(\text{OC}_2\text{H}_5)_3$) and Trimethoxy (3,3,3-trifluoropropyl)silane (TFP-TMOS) ($\text{C}_6\text{H}_{13}\text{F}_3\text{O}_3\text{Si}$), 2,4-Dinitrotoluene (2,4-DNT), toluene, ethanol (EtOH) and hydrochloric acid (37%) (HCl) were purchased from Sigma Aldrich. Poly[2,5-di(3,7-decyloxy)-1,4-phenylenevinylene]-co-[3-(4'-(3',7"-decyloxy)phenyl)-1,4-phenylenevinylene]-co-[3-(3'-(3',7-decyloxy)phenyl)-1,4-

* Corresponding authors.

E-mail addresses: ids@st-andrews.ac.uk (I.D.W. Samuel), gat@st-andrews.ac.uk (G.A. Turnbull).

phenylenevinylene}], known as PDY-132 (Super Yellow), was purchased from Merck, and 1 cm × 1 cm glass cover slips were purchased from Agar Scientific. All chemicals were used as received without further purification.

2.2. Film fabrication

Super Yellow films were fabricated by dissolving the polymer in toluene at a concentration of 6.5 mg ml⁻¹, prior to spin-coating on a glass cover slip at 2000 rpm for 60 s. The ormosil component was made by combining MTEOS, TFP-TMOS, EtOH, water and HCl in a 1:1:6.25:4:0.007 ratio following the process outlined in [7]; a ratio of 4:1 water:precursor was selected since higher ratios did not appear to allow explosive ingress due to tighter crosslinking producing smaller pores in the ormosil matrix, and lower ratios resulted in lower Photoluminescence Quantum Yield (PLQY) values by an average of 18%. To prepare the ormosil, the silane precursors and EtOH were combined in a vial and set to stir, with subsequent dropwise addition of the HCl. The solution was stirred for one week at ambient temperature prior to spin-coating over the Super Yellow film at 2000 rpm for 60 s. The resulting composite was cured on a hotplate at 60 °C over 24 h. This temperature was chosen to avoid possible degradation of the PLQY of the Super Yellow film due to chemical oxidation at elevated temperatures, but to still allow sufficient evaporation of the solvent and promote ormosil curing. Lower curing temperatures resulted in films with a lowered PLQY of up to 7%. Once hotplate curing was complete the composite films were stored at room temperature in the dark in sealed containers until used.

2.3. Photophysics

Absorption spectra were recorded on a Varian Cary 300 Bio UV–Vis absorption spectrometer under ambient conditions. Emission spectra were recorded on an Edinburgh Instruments FLS980 Fluorescence spectrometer in steady-state mode with an excitation wavelength of 405 nm for the uncoated film and 440 nm for the coated film. PLQY measurements of the ormosil-coated sensors were performed in an integrating sphere [21] using a Hamamatsu Photonics C9920-02 measurement system with an excitation wavelength of 440 nm. A Veeco Dektak 150 surface profiler was used to investigate film thicknesses, which were typically 100 nm for the final layers. The response to nitroaromatics is unaffected by the thickness of the ormosil layer, within the parameter range studied of 100–200 nm. Thicker polymer films have been shown [22] to slow the quenching response due to quenching molecules penetrating the polymer matrix at a fixed rate. To measure water contact angle, a goniometer was used with angles estimated by eye using the built-in protractor.

2.4. Experimental sensing procedure

Fluorescence from the sensor film was measured while immersed in water and various concentrations of 2,4-DNT. The films were excited with light at 440 nm. The spin-coated films were placed in a home-made PTFE bracket and inserted into a plastic cuvette to minimise movement during measurement, and to ensure reproducibility of sensor position between measurements. Calibration curves were obtained by taking an emission measurement in deionised water prior to adding solutions of 2,4-DNT varying from 7.2 μM to 7.2 mM. To test the recovery and repeatability behaviour of the sensor, measurements were taken as the film was alternately immersed in clean and contaminated water.

To test the response of the films to 2,4-DNT in the vapour phase, the film was placed in a sealed chamber connected to a nitrogen line as described elsewhere [3]. The film was exposed to clean nitrogen prior to introducing 2,4-DNT vapour into the line at a concentration below the saturated vapour pressure of 411 ppb [23], and the emission measured during 100 s of exposure.

3. Results and discussion

The absorbance and emission spectra of an uncoated Super Yellow film, and coated Super Yellow film in air and water are shown in Fig. 1. Both spectra show wide bandwidths with the absorbance peak at 405 nm and the emission peak at 590 nm for the uncoated Super Yellow films. The ormosil-coated Super Yellow film displays broadened spectra with some spectral shifting, by around 40 nm to the red in the absorption spectrum, and by 15 nm to the blue in the emission spectrum. This may be attributable to partial mixing of the polymer and ormosil layers at the interface. The PLQY of an ormosil-coated film was found to be 32%, compared to 40% for an uncoated film.

Films with mechanically robust properties were obtained by spin-coating and hotplate curing. Fig. 2 compares the response to 2,4-DNT, in the vapour phase, of uncoated and ormosil-coated polymer films. Quantitative evaluations for vapour-phase 2,4-DNT detection is outlined in further detail in Ref. [3]. The fluorescence is seen to decrease rapidly following the start of the exposure at the same rate for both samples, suggesting that the ormosil layer is not impeding access to the quenching sites. Fluorescence from both films is quenched by

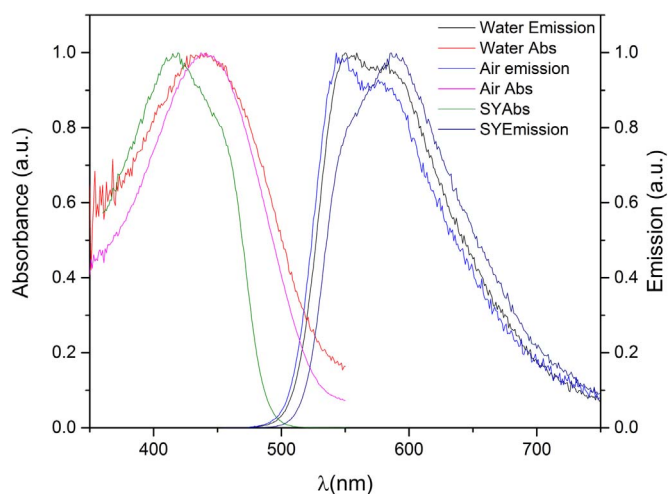


Fig. 1. Absorbance (green) and emission (navy blue) of uncoated Super Yellow film; absorbance and emission spectra of ormosil-coated Super Yellow (SY) in air (purple and light blue lines respectively), and in water (red and black lines respectively). (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article).

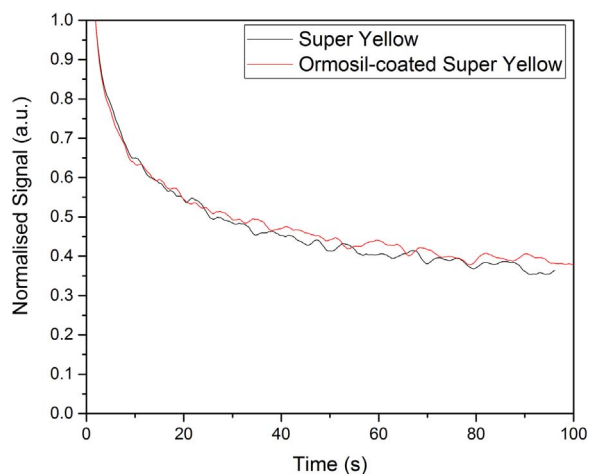


Fig. 2. Comparison in response of uncoated Super Yellow film (black line) and ormosil-coated Super Yellow film (red line) to vapour-phase 2,4-DNT. (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article).

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