A two-stage biological gas to liquid transfer process to convert carbon dioxide into bioplastic

Israa S. Al Rowaihi a, Benjamin Kick b, Stefan W. Grötzinger b,c, Christian Burger b, Ram Karan a, Dirk Weuster-Botz b, Jörg Eppinger a,⁎, Stefan T. Arold a,c

⁎ King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, KAUST Catalysis Center, Physical Sciences and Engineering Division, Thuwal, Saudi Arabia
a Technical University of Munich, Institute of Biochemical Engineering, Institute of Biochemical Engineering, Garching, Germany
b King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, Computational Bioscience Research Center, Biological and Environmental Sciences and Engineering Division, Thuwal, Saudi Arabia

text

A R T I C L E   I N F O
Article history:
Received 16 January 2018
Received in revised form 27 February 2018
Accepted 28 February 2018
Available online 06 March 2018

Keywords:
Carbon capture
Polyhydroxybutyrate
Sustainability
Acetobacterium woodii
Ralstonia eutrophus H16

A B S T R A C T
The fermentation of carbon dioxide (CO₂) with hydrogen (H₂) uses available low-cost gases to synthesis acetic acid. Here, we present a two-stage biological process that allows the gas to liquid transfer (Bio-GTL) of CO₂ into the biopolymer polyhydroxybutyrate (PHB). Using the same medium in both stages, first, acetic acid is produced (3.2 g L⁻¹) by Acetobacterium woodii from 5.2 L gas-mixture of CO₂:H₂ (15:85 v/v) under elevated pressure (≥2.0 bar) to increase H₂-solubility in water. Second, acetic acid is converted to PHB (3 g L⁻¹ acetate into 0.5 g L⁻¹ PHB) by Ralstonia eutrophus H16. The efficiencies and space-time yields were evaluated, and our data show the conversion of CO₂ into PHB with a 33.3% microbial cell content (percentage of ratio of PHB concentration to cell concentration) after 217 h. Collectively, our results provide a resourceful platform for future optimization and commercialization of a Bio-GTL for PHB production.

© 2018 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

1. Introduction
Carbon dioxide (CO₂) is an abundant, nontoxic, recyclable and relatively pure by-product of many industrial processes, making it a cheap and attractive precursor for industrial applications (Alper and Yuksel Orhan, 2017). The bioprocessing of CO₂ through microbial fermentation with the use of hydrogen (H₂) as an energy source is a promising approach to produce acetic acid in a sustainable and environmentally-friendly way (Hu et al., 2016), because H₂ can be produced at low cost from the gasification of renewable and sustainable resources (such as biomass and domestic and agricultural waste) (De Tissera et al., 2017; Hu et al., 2016). This process can be performed by acetogens, a class of anaerobic microorganisms that synthesize acetic acid and cell carbon from CO₂ and H₂ using the Wood–Ljungdahl pathway (WLP) (Supplementary information, Fig. S1) (Hawkins et al., 2013).

Compared to conventional chemical methods, biological acetic acid production has several advantages: a) it uses abundant low-cost gases such as CO₂ and H₂, b) it operates at low processing temperatures that offer significant energy and cost savings compared to alternative thermo-chemical approaches (e.g., the Fischer-Tropsch process, FTP) (Liew et al., 2013; Mohammadi et al., 2011; Munasinghe and Khanal, 2010), c) it profits from the high specificity of the enzymes involved in the microbial pathway that lead to improved yields of acetate production (Liew et al., 2013), and d) it avoids cost-intensive and toxic reaction steps (Fogler, 2010; Stephanopoulos et al., 1998).

Acetic acid has a broad spectrum of applications as a solvent and as a key raw material for many products, including polymers, paints, adhesives, paper coatings, and textile treatment (Cheung et al., 2011). These applications result in a global acetic acid demand of 6.5 million metric tons per year (Mt a⁻¹), of which only about 1.5 Mt a⁻¹ come from recycled sources (Cheung et al., 2011). Indeed, the efficient recovery of acetic acid remains challenging and has received considerable attention recently (Blanch, 2009; Jipa et al., 2009; Kertes and King, 2009).

To circumvent the cost-intensive extraction of acetic acid from liquid media, a two-stage biological process that transfers gas to liquid (Bio-GTL) can be used (Li et al., 2012). This process is a promising technology that combines two microbial production steps. First, the microbial conversion of gaseous substrates (e.g., CO₂ and H₂) into an intermediate product (e.g., acetic acid). In the second step this intermediate is biologically converted to bioproducts of higher value (Hu et al., 2016; Lagoa-Costa et al., 2017). One of the most interesting end products of Bio-GTL is polyhydroxybutyrate (PHB), a biodegradable biopolymer (Kulpreecha et al., 2009) that can be used in many applications, including packaging, biomedicine, and agriculture (Rehm, 2006). However, the production costs of conventional chemical PHB are high because of the use of expensive carbon sources (Kulpreecha et al., 2009). Bio-GTL could provide a cheaper and more sustainable process for the PHB

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biteb.2018.02.007
2589-014X/© 2018 Published by Elsevier Ltd.
production, by using CO₂ and H₂ with acetate as an intermediate compound.

The use of Bio-GTL to produce PHB from CO₂ was only reported once by a recent paper (Lagoa-Costa et al., 2017). In that study, in the first stage, the anaerobic syntrophic fermentation was carried out by Clostridium autoethanogenum to produce ethanol and acetic acid, followed by a second aerobic stage that consequently converts the produced acetic acid into PHB with a mixed microbial culture.

Here, we present a two-stage Bio-GTL to convert CO₂ into PHB using H₂ as an energy source. We focus on using two metabolically different strains. Stage one uses the acetogen A. woodii to convert CO₂ into acetic acid. In stage two, R. eutropha H16 converts acetate into PHB. Compared to the method by Lagoa-Costa et al. our approach has two advantages: (i) the increase in gas-to-liquid mass transfer by applying high pressure conditions without excessive gas consumption and (ii) the reduction of the experimental time. To increase the gas-to-liquid mass transfer for CO₂ capture during stage one, we use a high-pressure stirred-tank reactor at 2.0 and 5.5 bar pressure and monitor the production of acetic acid. In the second stage, we screen for the maximum growth and acetic acid uptake in parallel bioreactor fermentations on a milliliter-scale setup, under a wide range of acetic acid concentrations and pH values. We then integrate the kinetics (production of acetic acid and conversion rates of acetate into PHB) and thermodynamics (energy efficiency), as well as the conditions with the highest energy efficiency into a Bio-GTL using one optimized medium for both microorganisms (Fig. 1). Our results provide the foundation for a novel approach for a sustainable bioplastics production from CO₂.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Microorganisms

A. woodii (DSM 1030) and R. eutropha H16 (DSM 428) strains were purchased from the German Collection of Microorganisms and Cell Cultures (DSMZ, Braunschweig, Germany). Fresh cultures were prepared from aliquots and stored at −80 °C.

2.2. Media and culturing

Anaerobic pre-cultures of A. woodii were grown heterotrophically to an early stationary phase at 30 °C, 160 rpm in shaking flasks (Incu-Shaker Mini™, Benchmark, New Jersey, USA) placed in a N₂ glovebox (InerTec AG, Grenchen, Switzerland) in medium ‘A1’ consisting of NH₄Cl 1.0 g L⁻¹; KH₂PO₄ 0.33 g L⁻¹; K₂HPO₄ 0.45 g L⁻¹; MgSO₄·7H₂O 0.16 g L⁻¹; yeast extract 2.0 g L⁻¹ (Sigma-Aldrich, Missouri, USA); NaHCO₃ 10 g L⁻¹; cysteine·HCl·H₂O 0.5 g L⁻¹; Na₂S·9H₂O 0.5 g L⁻¹; nitrilotriacetic acid 30 mg L⁻¹; MnSO₄·H₂O 10 mg L⁻¹; NaCl 20 mg L⁻¹; FeSO₄·7H₂O 2.0 mg L⁻¹; CoSO₄·7H₂O 3.6 mg L⁻¹; CaCl₂·2H₂O 2.0 mg L⁻¹; ZnSO₄·7H₂O 3.6 mg L⁻¹; CuSO₄·5H₂O 0.2 mg L⁻¹; KAl(SO₄)₂·12H₂O 0.4 mg L⁻¹; H₃BO₃ 0.2 mg L⁻¹; Na₂MoO₄·2H₂O 0.2 mg L⁻¹; NiCl₂·6H₂O 0.5 mg L⁻¹; Na₂SeO₃·5H₂O 6 × 10⁻³ mg L⁻¹; biotin 4 × 10⁻⁷ mg L⁻¹; folic acid 4 × 10⁻⁷ mg L⁻¹; pyridoxine·HCl 0.2 mg L⁻¹; thiamine·HCl·2H₂O 0.1 mg L⁻¹; riboflavin 0.1 mg L⁻¹; nicotinic acid 0.1 mg L⁻¹; p-Ca-pantothenate 0.1 mg L⁻¹; cyanocobalamin 2 × 10⁻⁸ mg L⁻¹; p-aminobenzoic acid 0.1 mg L⁻¹; lipoic acid 0.1 mg L⁻¹; fructose 10 g L⁻¹. The initial pH was 7.0 and the inoculum was 1 mL of frozen cells (cryo stock, prepared by 0.9 mL early stationary phase cultures reserved in 0.1 mL DMSO) in 200 mL medium ‘A1’. Batch processes for autotrophic fermentation of A. woodii were performed in a high-pressure reactor using 1 L medium ‘A2’ (initial pH 7.0) in which the concentrations of yeast extract, vitamins and trace elements were doubled to avoid growth limitation and the NaHCO₃ concentration was reduced from 10 g L⁻¹ to 5 g L⁻¹ as mentioned in the literature (Demler and Weuster-Botz, 2011; Kantzow et al., 2015). Later, medium ‘A2’ was modified to 1 L medium ‘A3’ by increasing the yeast extract concentration from 4 g L⁻¹ to 6 g L⁻¹, which was used for autotrophic fermentation with an initial pH of 7.0. The inoculum for medium ‘A2’ and ‘A3’ were harvested from 200 mL pre-

![Fig. 1. Schematic overview of the experimental procedures. In stage I: the fermentation of the gas mixture CO₂:H₂ was done using A. woodii in a high-pressure stirred-tank reactor to increase the gas-to-liquid mass transfer. Stage II: Screening the effect of different concentrations of acetic acid on growth and acetate uptake in R. eutropha in a milliliter-scale setup while varying pH to determine toxic levels of acetate. Integrating of the kinetics and thermodynamics, and the conditions with highest energy efficiency into a Bio-GTL using one optimized medium for both microorganisms.](image-url)
cultures in early stationary phase by centrifugation (Eppendorf centrifuge 5430 R, Eppendorf, Hamburg, Germany; 4500 ×g, 10 min, 4 °C). The pellet was dissolved in 10 mL of medium ‘A2’. The inoculum was anaerobically transferred with a syringe into the reactor. To increase the gas-to-liquid mass transfer for CO₂ capture, 2.0 bar and 5.5 bar absolute pressure were applied on medium ‘A2’. Medium ‘A3’ was applied under 5.5 bar only. The metabolic products were identified, quantified (by HPLC and GC–MS, as described later) and the energy efficiency of CO₂ conversion to acetic acid was calculated. Pre-cultures of *R. eutropha* H16 were grown overnight (the inoculum was a loop-full from cryo stock) at 30 °C, 140 rpm (Genesys 20, Thermo Spectronic, Neuss, Germany) in 1 L rich medium (peptone 5 g L⁻¹, meat extract 3 g L⁻¹). 10% (v/v) of the overnight culture were transferred in 1 L (end volume) minimal medium ‘R1’ (initial pH 7.0) consisting of (NH₄)₂SO₄ 3 g L⁻¹; KH₂PO₄ 1.5 g L⁻¹; Na₂HPO₄ 4.45 g L⁻¹; MgSO₄ 0.097 g L⁻¹; CaCl₂·6H₂O 0.02 g L⁻¹; FeSO₄·7H₂O 0.02 g L⁻¹; MnCl₂·4H₂O 24 μg L⁻¹; ZnSO₄·7H₂O 528 μg L⁻¹; Na₂MoO₄·2H₂O 150 μg L⁻¹; CuSO₄·5H₂O 240 μg L⁻¹; CoCl₂·6H₂O 90 μg L⁻¹; H₃BO₃·8H₂O 264 μg L⁻¹; NiCl₂·24 μg L⁻¹; 30 g L⁻¹ fructose as carbon source. The cultures were grown for 15 h at 30 °C, 140 rpm (Genesys 20, Thermo Spectronic, Neuss, Germany). The influence of different acetic acid concentrations on cell growth was screened in single-use stirred-tank bioreactors on a milliliter scale (bioREACTOR 48, 2mag AG, Munich, Germany). Inoculum from ‘R1’ medium was inoculated to a final OD₆₀₀ of 1.6–1.8 in 12 mL R2 medium consisting of (NH₄)₂SO₄ 1.83 g L⁻¹; KH₂PO₄ 1.47 g L⁻¹; K₂HPO₄ 2.46 g L⁻¹; MgSO₄·7H₂O 0.27 g L⁻¹; CaCl₂·6H₂O 0.03 g L⁻¹; FeSO₄·7H₂O 0.02 L⁻¹; MnCl₂·4H₂O 24 μg L⁻¹; ZnSO₄·7H₂O 528 μg L⁻¹; Na₂MoO₄·2H₂O 150 μg L⁻¹; CuSO₄·5H₂O 240 μg L⁻¹; CoCl₂·6H₂O 90 μg L⁻¹; H₃BO₃·8H₂O 264 μg L⁻¹; NiCl₂·24 μg L⁻¹; The batch fermentation was carried out with 30 g L⁻¹ fructose as a starting carbon source for 8 h at 30 °C. The pH was varied in the following range: pH 6.5, pH 7.0, pH 7.5, pH 8.0. pH control was performed using 12% (w/w) NH₄OH and 0.5 N H₂PO₄. After 8 h, different concentrations of acetic acid were supplied in the form of sodium acetate (pKa 4.75) to reach the final concentrations: 2.5 g L⁻¹; 5.1 g L⁻¹; 20 g L⁻¹ and incubated for an additional 10 h. The pH control was performed using 0.5 M KOH and 0.5 M H₂PO₄ under nitrogen-limited conditions. The optical density (OD₆₀₀) was measured at the end of each run (Genesys 20; Thermo Spectronic, Neuss, Germany). The integration study with *R. eutropha* H16 was performed in 50 mL medium obtained from *A. woodii* after high-pressure fermentation. Prior to integration, *A. woodii* was filtered from the medium using bottle top filters 0.2 μm, VWR international, PA, USA. *R. eutropha* H16 was incubated in shaking flasks at 30 °C, 140 rpm (initial pH 7.5). The *R. eutropha* H16 inoculum was pre-grown in medium ‘R1’ overnight. Prior to integration, to remove media ‘R1’ residues, the cells were centrifuged (Eppendorf centrifuge 5430 R, Eppendorf, Hamburg, Germany; 4500 ×g, 10 min, 4 °C) and washed once with phosphate buffer (30 mM, pH 7.5). The amount of inoculum was chosen to reach a final OD₆₀₀ of 1.5 in the experimental vessel.

### 2.3. High-pressure reactor

Autotrophic fermentation of *A. woodii* was performed in a high-pressure stirred-tank “ecoclave 075” type 1B/1.6 L reactor without baffles (Büchi-Glas-Uster, Uster, Switzerland). Dimensions and system operating conditions were 60 × 45 × 100 cm width/depth/height; −1/ +6 bar min./max. pressure; −20/+200 °C min./max. Temperature controlled with a stainless-steel 2mag PT100 external temperature sensor (2mag-USA, Florida, USA). A mixed-gas tank of H₂:CO₂ (85:15 v/v) was connected to the system and controlled by a pressure regulator (bpc 2, Büchi pressflow controller; Büchi-Glas-Uster, Uster, Switzerland). The pH control system consisted of dosing pumps (ProMinent® The delta®8, Pennsylvania, USA) for maximum backpressure of 25 bar (pumps controlled by frequency) and an analog pH glass sensor (Orbisint CSP11; Endress + Hauser, Switzerland). Since the pH decreased due to acetic acid production, 0.1 M KOH was used to adapt the pH. To eliminate any traces of oxygen in the medium, the sterile medium was stripped with argon for 10 purges, followed by 10 purges of the gas mixture (0.5 mg L⁻¹ resazurin was used as indication of oxygen absence). The reactor vessel was autoclaved and afterwards filled with 1 L filtered medium via a peristaltic pump (Thermo Scientific Masterflex® PS, Illinois, USA). The agitation speed was set to 500 rpm using a stirrer shaft Dm10 × 294 with turbine Dm45 (Büchi-glasm-Uster, Uster, Switzerland), and the temperature was controlled to 30 °C. The fermentation was performed in batch mode, where the gas from the mixed-gas tank was fed in the reactor to a set pressure using the bpc 2 (Büchi pressflow controller; Büchi-Glas-Uster, Uster, Switzerland). When the pressure of the gas dropped due to the uptake by the microorganisms, the drop was recorded in L by a press flow gas controller (bpc 6002; Büchi-glasm-Uster, Uster, Switzerland) and the same value was fed to the reactor from the tank to build the pressure again.

### 2.4. Parallel fermentations in milliliter-scale stirred-tank bioreactors

Parallel fermentation experiments were performed as described previously (Meo et al., 2017) on a milliliter-scale in sterile single-use stirred-tank bioreactors with an initial volume of 10 mL at 30 °C (bioREACTOR, 2mag AG, Munich, Germany). Dissolved oxygen (DO) and pH were monitored by fluorimetric sensors immobilized at the bottom of each single-use bioreactor (*Kusterer et al., 2008*) using fluorimetric readers (*MCR B’2 v5*, PreSens GmbH, Regensburg, Germany). The pH of each bioreactor was adjusted with 12% (w/w) NH₄OH and 0.5 M H₂PO₄ during the first 8 h, then with 0.5 M NaOH (nitrogen limitation conditions to promote PHB production) and 0.5 M H₂PO₄ by a liquid handling system (*Freedom Evo®, Tecan GmbH, Crailsheim, Germany*) controlled by the software fedbatchXP (DasGip – an Eppendorf company, Jülich, Germany). The minimal volume of base addition was set to 10 μL (0.1% of the reaction volume). Substrate feeding was done manually. Samples were withdrawn automatically with the liquid handling system at preset process times and were used for the determination of bacterial growth and of concentrations of acetic acid. The oxygen transfer rate was kept sufficiently high by using gas-inducing stirrers (*Hortsch and Weuster-Botz, 2010*) operated at an agitation speed of 2800 rpm and a headspace aeration of 0.1 L sterile air min⁻¹ reactor⁻¹. Liquid volume loss by evaporation was avoided by using sterile air that was saturated with water at room temperature (25 °C), and the headspace cooling was adjusted to 20 °C (Meo et al., 2017).

### 2.5. Fermentation product identification and quantification

High-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC, Agilent 1200 series, California, USA) was used to quantify the fermentation products. The HPLC was equipped with ICE-Coregel 87 H3 column (Transgenic, Minnesota, USA), and the eluent was 0.008 M H₂SO₄ solution at a flow rate of 0.8 mL min⁻¹. A UV–VIS detector was used at λ = 214 nm and 35 °C. The acetic acid and formic acid were spiked on the HPLC to identify their retention times. The unknown metabolic products were identified by detecting their retention times and collecting the fractions using an HPLC equipped with a fraction collector (HPLC, Agilent 1200 series, G1364B Fraction Collector, California, USA). The fractions were freeze-dried (VirTis benchtop 6 K, New York, USA), treated with methoxyamine and then derivatized using trimethylsilyl (TMS) agent (BSEFA, Thermo Fisher Scientific, Massachusetts, USA). The fractions were analyzed using gas chromatography coupled with mass spectrometry, (GC/MS 7890/5975GC; Agilent Technologies, California, USA) equipped with a DB-5 capillary column (30 m, 0.25 mm ID and 0.25 μm film thickness, Agilent Technologies, California, USA). The injection volume was 1 μL. The column ran with an initial temperature of 50 °C for 1 min, a ramp rate of 10 °C min⁻¹ up to 290 °C for 35 min (total run time 60 min). The flow rate was 1.5 mL min⁻¹. The GC/MS raw
data file of each sample was de-convoluted using the AMDIS software (Mallard and Reed, 1997) and each compound detected was identified by the NIST 11 library database (Agilent Technologies, California, USA).

2.6. PHB quantification with GC-FID

Cultures (2 mL) were centrifuged (Eppendorf centrifuge 5430 R, Eppendorf, Hamburg, Germany) at 6,500 × g, 50 min, 4 °C and then washed with double distilled water (ddH2O) to decrease residual salts from the medium. Subsequently, the cells were re-suspended in water, shock-frozen in liquid N2 and then lyophilized. Afterwards, methanolysis was performed by dissolving the dried cells in 2 mL of 6% (v/v) sulfuric acid in methanol solution containing 100 mg L−1 of sodium benzoate as an internal standard. Then 2 mL of chloroform were added to the mixture and heated for 3 h at 100 °C in a tightly closed pressure tube. After methanolysis, the samples were cooled on ice for 10 min and 1 mL of ddH2O per 2 mL of CHCl3 (1:2 ratio) was added (Oehmen et al., 2005). The mixture was vortexed for 1 min and the phases were separated by centrifugation at 4500 × g for 5 min, at 20 °C. The organic phase was collected, neutralized with NaHCO3 and dried over Na2SO4. The resulting mixture of 3-hydroxy-butanoyl methylester (3HBM) and further intracellular components in CHCl3 were characterized and quantified by GC-FID (Agilent Technology GC system 7890A/5975 inter XL EI, CI MSD with a triple axis detector, California, USA), using the purchased Poly[(R)-3-hydroxybutyric acid] from Sigma-Aldrich (Sigma-Aldrich, Missouri, USA) column and ran a temperature profile starting at 50 °C for 1 min then increasing 15 °C min−1 up to 240 °C for 5 min (total run time 18.6 min). The injection volume was 1 μL and the flow rate was 1.7 mL min−1.

2.6.1. Theory/calculation

The cell-specific acetate formation/production rate (qp) is defined as:

\[ q_p = \left(1/\text{ct} \right) \times \frac{dc_p}{dt} \]

where:

- \( c_p \): biomass concentration, g L−1
- \( c_p \): product concentration, g L−1
- \( q_p \): specific product formation rate, g(product) g(biomass)−1 h−1

The space-time yield:

\[ P_{\text{prod}} \text{/ process time} \]

Energy efficiency (η):

\[ H_2 \text{ to acetic acid by A. woodii} \ (\eta_{H_2 \rightarrow \text{AcOH}}) \]

Combustion energy of 1 mMole H2:

\[ H_2 + \frac{1}{2} O_2 \rightarrow H_2O \]

\[ \Delta_r G^\circ = -264.5 \text{ kJ mol}^{-1} \]

Combustion energy of 1 mMole acetic acid:

\[ \text{CH}_3\text{COOH + 2 O}_2 \rightarrow 2 \text{H}_2\text{O} + 2 \text{CO}_2 \]

\[ \Delta_r G^\circ = -873.2 \text{ kJ mol}^{-1} \]

\[ \eta_{H_2 \rightarrow \text{AcOH}} = \text{Combustion energy of acetic acid/Combustion energy of H}_2 \]

acetate to PHB by R. eutropha (\( \eta_{\text{AcOH to PHB}} \))

Combustion energy of 1 mMole acetic acid:

\[ \text{CH}_3\text{COOH + 2 O}_2 \rightarrow 2 \text{H}_2\text{O} + 2 \text{CO}_2 \]

\[ \Delta_r G^\circ = -873.2 \text{ kJ mol}^{-1} \]

Combustion energy of 1 mMole PHB:

\[ \frac{1}{n} \text{PHB} + 4.5 \text{O}_2 \rightarrow 4 \text{CO}_2 + 4 \text{H}_2\text{O} \]

\[ \eta_{\text{AcOH to PHB}} = \text{Combustion energy of PHB/Combustion energy of acetate} \]

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Stage I

3.1.1. Stage Ia: CO2 to acetic acid by A. woodii and the influence of pressure

We assessed the fermentation of A. woodii in a high-pressure stirred tank reactor using a H2:CO2 gas mixture of 85:15 (v/v) at 2.0 bar and 5.5 bar to increase solubility of gases with pressure to improve growth and acetic acid production (Groher and Weuster-Botz, 2016; Kanztown and Weuster-Botz, 2016; Liew et al., 2013). We used a sealed-high pressure reactor that prevented the loss of gases introduced to the reactor, recorded the gas consumption and calculated the energy efficiency. We monitored the growth and acetic acid production of A. woodii in 'A' medium at pH 7.0. At 2.0 bar pressure (H2 partial pressure 1.7 bar, equal to 1.3 mM H2), a total of 5.2 L gas was consumed. The cell dry weight (CDW) increased from 0.22 g L−1 to 0.40 g L−1 during the stationary phase (212 h of culturing). Acetic acid production was 3.20 g L−1, with a space-time yield of 0.36 g L−1 d−1 and a maximum cell-specific acetate formation rate (\( q_{\text{acetate}} \)) of 0.09 g AcOH g CDW h−1 (2.1 g AcOH g CDW d−1) during the exponential growth phase. The energy efficiency (\( \eta_{H_2 \rightarrow \text{AcOH}} \)) was 55% (Fig. 2).

The final acetic acid concentrations might seem low (3.20 g L−1 after 212 h of culturing) compared to 59.2 g L−1 after a processing time of approximately 77 h reported by (Kanztown and Weuster-Botz, 2016). These differences can be explained by the different approaches used. In our approach, the gas mixture (85 H2:15 CO2 v/v) was delivered by a sealed-high pressure reactor using a H2:CO2 gas mixture of 85:15 (v/v) at 2.0 bar pressure (H2 partial pressure 1.7 bar, equal to 1.3 mM H2), a total of 5.2 L gas was consumed. The cell dry weight (CDW) increased from 0.22 g L−1 to 0.40 g L−1 during the stationary phase (212 h of culturing). Acetic acid production was 3.20 g L−1, with a space-time yield of 0.36 g L−1 d−1 and a maximum cell-specific acetate formation rate (\( q_{\text{acetate}} \)) of 0.09 g AcOH g CDW h−1 (2.1 g AcOH g CDW d−1) during the exponential growth phase. The energy efficiency (\( \eta_{H_2 \rightarrow \text{AcOH}} \)) was 55% (Fig. 2).

When comparing the approach of Lagoa-Coate et al. to our approach, increasing the pressure of the gas mixture reduced the process time significantly, while increasing acetate production, space time yield and \( q_{\text{acetate}} \). The use of pressure allows a moderate gas consumption without losses. Moreover, in our experiments we observed a decrease in energy efficiency (\( \eta_{H_2 \rightarrow \text{AcOH}} \)) when increasing the pressure from 2.0 bar to
5.5 bar, and at 5.5 bar the energy efficiency was further reduced with increasing nitrogen content. The reduced energy efficiency at 5.5 bar may result from the applied high partial pressure of CO2 that causes a shift in the thermodynamic equilibrium, leading to the accumulation of CO in the carbonyl branch of the WLP (Hawkins et al., 2013; Schuchmann and Muller, 2014) (Supplementary information, Fig. S1). CO inhibits the ability of A. woodii to use H2 because the hydrogen-dependent carbon dioxide reductase HDCR is sensitive to CO (Bertsch and Muller, 2015; Schuchmann and Muller, 2012; Schuchmann and Muller, 2013), which results in the inhibition of acetate production from H2:CO2 (Bertsch and Muller, 2015). Diekert et al. confirmed that at 1.7 bar of H2:CO2 (80:20 v/v) atmosphere in batch cultures, A. woodii generates CO when forming acetic acid (Diekert et al., 1986). Additionally, the increased H2 partial pressure in the gas phase or its accumulation in the fermentation medium may alter or inhibit the production of NADH, which consequentially redirects the carbon flow away from cell growth and acetic acid production by A. woodii in autotrophic batch processes (Nie et al., 2008).

### 3.1.2. Stage Ib: Optimization of the acetic acid production rate in enriched medium at 5.5 bar

To increase the energy efficiency ($\eta_{H_2 \text{to} \text{ AcOH}}$) at 5.5 bar, we increased the yeast extract content from 4.0 g L$^{-1}$ to 6.0 g L$^{-1}$ (medium ‘A3’ to A3) to prevent nutrient limitations and promote higher cell activity, which should result in increased utilization of H2 and CO2. The consumption of 30 L gas mixture (H2:CO2, 85:15 v/v) and the production of 4.50 g L$^{-1}$ acetic acid was observed in the enriched medium (medium ‘A3’) in the stationary phase (96 h of cultivation). The space-time yield was 1.12 g L$^{-1}$ d$^{-1}$ and the maximum acetate formation rate, $q_{acetate}$, was 0.6 gAcOH gCDW$^{-1}$ h$^{-1}$ compared to 0.96 g L$^{-1}$ d$^{-1}$ and 0.50 gAcOH gCDW$^{-1}$ h$^{-1}$, respectively, with 4 g L$^{-1}$ yeast extract (medium ‘A2’) at 5.5 bar. However, the energy efficiency ($\eta_{H_2 \text{to} \text{ AcOH}}$) was 5.4% in medium ‘A3’ compared to 22% in medium ‘A2’ (Table 1). Also, substantially more gas (30 L compared to 8.9 L of CO2:H2 mixture) was consumed, but less acetic acid was produced.

Detailed analysis of the medium revealed that A. woodii produced other substances besides acetic acid, such as formic acid, uracil, pyroglutamate and traces of lactate (Fig. 3), when grown with increased yeast extract. The differences in product formation in the enriched medium likely resulted from the additional vitamins and nitrogen supplemented from the high content of yeast extract. These vitamins are essential cofactors for the WLP (Leclerc et al., 1998) and the additional nitrogen might promote build-up of the nitrogen-containing products uracil and pyroglutamate. We hypothesize that the high concentration of yeast extract in combination with the increased pressure led to a high production of NADH, which altered the carbon flow. The excess of NADH would then lead to the accumulation of acetyl-CoA in the WLP where acetyl-CoA is not only converted to acetic acid, but also to pyruvate. We further hypothesize that the pyruvate is then utilized in

**Table 1**

Bacterial growth under different pressures of CO2:H2 gas and different media. Our method is compared to the approach of Lagoa-Costa et al. (Lagoa-Costa et al., 2017).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pressure (bar)</th>
<th>Atmospheric</th>
<th>2.0</th>
<th>5.5</th>
<th>5.5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>A2 A2 A3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strain</td>
<td>C. autoethanogenum A. woodii</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acetate production (g L$^{-1}$)</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>3.20 5.60 4.50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space-time yield (g L$^{-1}$ d$^{-1}$)</td>
<td>0.121</td>
<td>0.36 0.96 1.12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$q_{acetate}$ (gAcOH gCDW$^{-1}$ h$^{-1}$)</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.09 0.50 0.60</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gas mixture</td>
<td>CO:CO$_2$:H$_2$:N$_2$ (30:10:20:40 v/v)</td>
<td>CO$_2$:H$_2$ (15:85)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gas utilized (L)</td>
<td>5240</td>
<td>5.2 8.9 30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process time (h)</td>
<td>523</td>
<td>212 140 96</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy efficiency %</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>55 22 5.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

($\eta_{H_2 \text{to} \text{ AcOH}}$)
the TCA cycle that produces more NADH, which, in turn, is used to synthesize uracil and pyroglutamic acid using the excess of nitrogen (Supplementary information, Fig. S2).

3.2. Stage II: Conversion of acetic acid to PHB by R. eutropha H16

To produce PHB from acetic acid, R. eutropha H16, a well-studied model strain for PHB production, was chosen. We first assessed the effect of acetate concentration on aerobic cell growth, to avoid the toxicity at higher concentrations of acetate and/or other byproducts. Therefore, R. eutropha H16 growth was investigated in parallel in 10 mL stirred-tank bioreactors under varying concentrations of acetate and pH. R. eutropha H16 were grown in miniaturized stirred-tank reactors using ‘R2’ medium supplemented with 30 g L\(^{-1}\) fructose at different pH levels of pH 6.5, pH 7.0, pH 7.5 and pH 8.0. After 8 h of growth, acetic acid was added to reach the following concentrations: 2.5 g L\(^{-1}\), 5.0 g L\(^{-1}\), 7.5 g L\(^{-1}\), 10 g L\(^{-1}\), 15 g L\(^{-1}\) and 20 g L\(^{-1}\). After 10 h (total 18 h) of batch cultivation, OD\(_{600}\) was measured (Supplementary information, Fig. S3). We observed that at pH 7.5, no severe toxic effect was detected when the acetate concentration was up to 7.5 g L\(^{-1}\) and the cell density increased to an OD\(_{600}\) of 9.8. By increasing the acetate concentration up to 20 g L\(^{-1}\) at pH 7.5, the growth increased to an OD\(_{600}\) of 4.4 after 10 h. Despite the small increase, pH 7.5 allowed the bacteria to maintain better growth compared to pH 6.5, pH 7.0 and pH 8.5. These results showed that the ideal process pH is 7.5 with a maximum acetic acid concentration of 7.5 g L\(^{-1}\), where a consumption rate of 0.8 g L\(^{-1}\) h\(^{-1}\) OD\(_{600}\) acetate was measured. However, at a lower pH of 6.5, a severe toxic effect of acetic acid started at relatively low concentrations of 5.0 g L\(^{-1}\), which resulted in a decline in growth (Supplementary information). This severe effect is also visible at pH 7.0 with higher acetic acid concentrations (up to 10 g L\(^{-1}\)). At pH 8.0, the decline in growth was visible at 15 g L\(^{-1}\) acetic acid.

Short-chain fatty acids (SCFA) such as acetic acid tend to split into anions above their pKa (Chung et al., 1997; Visser and Postma, 1973). Acetic acid has a pKa of 4.76. Therefore, the higher the solution pH, the more acetic acid is split into anions. Although free anions can slowly enter the cytoplasm where they might adversely affect cell metabolism, cells can pump anions out of their cytoplasm. However, this mechanism of detoxification through anti-porters requires energy and results in a decreased growth rate and PHB production with increased anion concentrations (Axke and Bailey, 1995). At pH values below the pKa values of the SCFAs, SCFAs accumulate in their un-dissociated form, which can dissolve into the lipid bilayer of the cell membrane and act as uncoupling agents (Visser and Postma, 1973). Conversely, dissolved intact SCFAs allow protons to pass through the cell membrane by acting as proton carriers, resulting in uncoupled electron transport from the ATP synthase (Baronofsky et al., 1984). This electron transport and proton pumping continues at a rapid rate, but no proton gradient is generated, and ATP can no longer be synthesized. The lack of ATP is initially compensated by utilization of acetyl-CoA in the TCA cycle, which inhibits the production of PHB and results in activity inhibition and eventually cell death over time (Chung et al., 1997).

Under the conditions used, pH 7.5 appears to most favorably balance the different effects of intact or dissociated acetic acid. Notably, at alkaline conditions between pH 8.0 to 8.5, 99.9% of acetic acid remained in its dissociated form (Yu and Wang, 2001), but this pH range had an inhibitory effect on R. eutropha H16 growth (Wang and Yu, 2000). These findings underscore that pH control is important because it affects the ionization of the active components of microbial cells (enzymes, enzyme complexes, or other ionizable substrate receptors). For optimal growth and activity, these components must be in their appropriate ionic forms to bind their substrates (Tan et al., 1998). Our results show the benefit of a slightly alkaline pH, while feeding acetic acid (20 g L\(^{-1}\)) with the highest cell yield at pH 7.5 and an OD\(_{600}\) of 4.4 (after 10 h). In our study, the comparatively high tolerance for acetic acid can be explained by the use of bioreactors. The controlled environment in bioreactors (e.g., no oxygen limitation in combination with pH control) potentially allow optimized cell growth because of the higher pumping capacity of the cells.

3.3. Bio-GTL microbial process to convert the produced acetic from CO2 fermentation into PHB

The here presented approach focused on the use of two metabolically different strains (A. woodii and R. eutropha). The development of a medium that supports both metabolic modes (gas fermentation and PHB production) would markedly enhance cost-effectiveness and ease of handling, and hence provide important improvements compared to the approach proposed previously by Lagoa-Costa et al., 2017 (Lagoa-Costa et al., 2017). We were indeed able to establish and optimize such a medium that can first be used for A. woodii, and then be kept for R. eutropha after simply filtering out A. woodii and adjusting the pH of the medium. For this protocol, in stage 1, A. woodii fermentation was carried out at 2.0 bar (the pressure that provided the highest energy efficiency) in medium A2. At the end of this reaction, this medium A2 contained 3.20 g L\(^{-1}\) acetate. We then filtered out A. woodii, adjusted the pH to 7.5 and inoculated with R. eutropha H16, which was pre-grown to an OD\(_{600}\) of 1.5 (0.27 g L\(^{-1}\)) in medium R1 and washed once with phosphate buffer (30 mM, pH 7.5). R. eutropha H16 grew to a final OD\(_{600}\) of 9.3 (active biomass 0.41 g L\(^{-1}\)) after 5 h of culturing with an uptake of 3.0 g L\(^{-1}\) acetate and a qacetate 1.46 gACOH g\(^{-1}\) CDW h\(^{-1}\). PHB production was 0.5 g L\(^{-1}\) and a qPHB of 0.24 gPHB g\(^{-1}\) CDW h\(^{-1}\) and the PHB content (percentage of weight) in the microbial cell was 33.3%. The PHB content was defined as the percentage of the ratio of PHB concentration to cell concentration (Ahn et al., 2000).

Despite the increase in biomass, due to the high nitrogen content from the acetogen media, R. eutropha had a higher qPHB and a PHB content compared to what was reported by Lagoa-Coate et al. (Lagoa-Costa et al., 2017). It appeared that the medium A2 successfully induced PHB production with a high PHB content by simply adjusting the pH to 7.5 (Table 2). Using a single medium that only requires pH adjustment is an important step towards a continuous setup in which both, the CO2 based production of acetic acid and the conversion of acetic acid to PHB are connected to each other.

4. Conclusion

We developed a Bio-GTL process to convert CO2 into PHB in two stages, but in one medium, using acetic acid as intermediate. The high-pressure reactor used in our study for CO2 fermentation delivered the gas to the stirring tank only when pressure dropped as a result of microbial consumption. This system prevented loss of gas, which is
advantageous compared to previous approaches where large gas volumes flow through the stirring tank (Lagoa-Costa et al., 2017). The process could be coupled with photovoltaics to electrochemically produce H2 for CO2 fermentation resulting in a sustainable photovoltaic/Bio-GLT approach for the production of bioplastic.

Acknowledgment

We thank V. Unkefer for editorial assistance.

Funding source declaration

The research reported in this publication was supported by King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) through the base Funding source declaration.

Author contributions

I.S. Al Rowaihi, W.S. Park, S.J. Lee, S.Y. Ahn, and J.E. Park. All authors reviewed and approved the manuscript being submitted.

Conflict of interest disclosure

The authors declare no financial or commercial conflicts of interest.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jibiteh.2018.02.007.

References


Table 2

Conceptual overview of the Bio-GTL microbial process reported in this paper in comparison to Lagoa-Costa et al. (Lagoa-Costa et al., 2017).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Microbial strain</th>
<th>Lagoa-Coate et al.</th>
<th>This paper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Culturing</td>
<td>Fed-batch</td>
<td>Shaking flask</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total acetate uptake (g L(^{-1}))</td>
<td>4.0 (8 pulses, 0.5 g L(^{-1}) pulse)</td>
<td>3.0 with direct inoculation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active biomass (mmol L(^{-1}))</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth (C(_{\text{CLO}<em>2}) mmol C(</em>{\text{CO}_2}) mmol L(^{-1}))</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PHB storage (C(<em>{\text{PHB}}) mmol C(</em>{\text{CLO}_2}) mmol L(^{-1}))</td>
<td>0.275</td>
<td>0.116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>qPHB (C(_{\text{PHB}}) mmol CCDW mmol L(^{-1}) h(^{-1}))</td>
<td>0.042</td>
<td>0.068</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PHB cell content (%)</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


