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Aqueous SET-LRP catalyzed with “in situ” generated Cu(0) demonstrates surface mediated activation and bimolecular termination

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The aqueous SET-LRP catalyzed with “in situ” generated Cu(0) of the two amphiphilic monomers 2-hydroxyethyl acrylate (HEA) and oligo(ethylene oxide) methyl ether acrylate (OEOMEA) was investigated at temperatures from −22 to +25 °C. The k^DPS values of both monomers are higher at 0 °C (4.61 min⁻¹ for OEOMEA and 2.60 min⁻¹ for HEA) than at 25 °C (1.60 min⁻¹ for OEOMEA and 1.12 min⁻¹ for HEA). These unexpected and unprecedented results are explained by the lower Cu(0) particle size obtained by the disproportionation of CuBr at 0 °C in H2O. Poly(OEOMEA) obtained by aqueous SET-LRP at 0 °C with the unexpectedly high k^DPS = 4.61 min⁻¹ exhibits 88% chain-end functionality at 100% monomer conversion, while the theoretical value would have to be ~0%. This high experimental chain-end functionality was explained by the slow desorption of the hydrophobic backbone containing the propagating radicals of these amphiphilic polymers from the surface of the catalyst due to their strong hydrophobic effect. Polymer radicals adsorbed on the surface of Cu(0) undergo monomer addition and reversible deactivation but do not undergo the bimolecular termination that requires desorption. This amplified adsorption–desorption process that mediates both the activation and the bimolecular termination explains the unexpectedly high chain-end functionality of the polymers synthesized by SET-LRP.

At the same time as these developments, the list of solvents used in SET-LRP was expanded to other solvents that in combination with aliphatic N-donor ligands, such as tris[2-dimethylaminoethyl] amine (Me6-TREN),1,43–45 and tris(2-amino)ethyl amine (TREN),1,2,4,16,43–45 mediate the disproportionation of Cu(i)X into Cu(II)X2 and Cu(0).46 This list includes but is not limited to H2O,46,47,55 mixtures of two solvents,46,55 and even blood serum.56 Most monomers used in SET-LRP can often mediate this disproportionation but do not always dissolve Cu(II)X2, limiting its usefulness under certain conditions.10,46,57

The catalyst most frequently employed in SET-LRP is Cu(0) in the form of powder2,4,12,58 including powder generated by the disproportionation of Cu(i)X in a large diversity of solvents,12 wire,12,64,69 activated wire59–62 and tubes.63,64 Almost all initiators employed in other metal catalyzed LRP such as alkyl halides,65,66 sulfonil halides,33,48,65,67–69 N-halides2,70 can be used as such or modified to become soluble for SET-LRP in various media including H2O. Only very few systematic investigations on SET-LRP with Cu(0) generated by disproportionation of Cu(i)X “in situ” in water26,37,38,42 and in mixtures of water with other solvents are available.1,2,26,37,38,47
It is important to mention that from many LRP methods that provide polymers with narrow molecular weight distribution, only SET-LRP generates polymers with both narrow molecular weight distribution and quantitative or near quantitative chain-end functionality. Narrow molecular weight distribution is an important feature of the polymers prepared by LRP but the most significant structural parameter of these polymers is the quantitative or near quantitative chain-end functionality combined with narrow molecular weight distribution. Chain-end functionality is the major parameter of a polymer that allows the construction of complex architectures such as multiple block copolymers, and dendrimers by iterative synthesis.

In a previous publication from our laboratory it was reported that the Cu(0) mediated SET-LRP of 2-hydroxyethyl acrylate (HEA) in H2O and in mixtures of protic solvents with H2O produces a gel of poly(HEA) (PHEA) exclusively on the surface of the catalysts. Gel formation was not observed when SET-LRP of HEA was performed in MeOH, DMSO or in MeOH containing less than 70% H2O. A fast adsorption to the surface and slow desorption of the hydrophilic chain of PHEA from the surface of the Cu(0) wire catalyst together with the amphiphilic character of PHEA was assumed to be responsible for this process. Therefore, we consider that SET-LRP of hydrophilic monomers containing hydrophobic backbones, amphiphilic monomers, such as HEA, oligo(ethylene oxide) methyl ether acrylate (OEOMEA), oligo(ethylene oxide) methyl ether methacrylate, 2-hydroxyethyl methacrylate, N-(2-hydroxypropyl)methacrylamide, and acryloyl morpholine exhibit amplified adsorption and desorption processes that may complement the previous studies on the elucidation of the role of the surface of Cu(0) catalyst on the activation and deactivation steps of SET-LRP. This publication reports the aqueous SET-LRP of HEA and OEOMEA mediated by “in situ” generated Cu(0) catalyst. The study reported here demonstrates that the surface of Cu(0) is responsible both for the activation of the initiator and dormant growing species, as well as for the much lower extent of bimolecular termination observed during polymer synthesis by SET-LRP.

Results and discussion

Temperature dependence of the aqueous SET-LRP of OEOMEA and HEA catalyzed by “In Situ” generated Cu(0)

Aqueous SET-LRP of the water soluble monomers OEOMEA and HEA was initiated with the water-soluble initiator oligo (ethylene glycol) methyl ether 2-bromoisobutyrate, OEOMEBr with M_w = 495, and catalyzed by the “in situ” generated Cu(0) (Scheme 1).

The preparation of the Cu(0) catalyst by the disproportionation of the CuBr “in situ” and the polymerization methodologies follow previously reported procedures elaborated in Percec and Haddleton laboratories (Fig. 1). Typically, the required amount of CuBr was added to a deoxygenated solution of H2O containing an equivalent amount of Me6-TREN to CuBr under N2, and the solution stirred (stirring rate = 480 rpm) for 30 min to allow complete disproportionation into a 1/1 mixture of Cu(0) and CuBr2. The K_eq for the disproportionation of Cu(j)X in water is in the range of 10^9 to 10^7. However, the disproportionation of the crystalline CuBr in the presence of Me6-TREN in water can be limited by a low rate of dissolution in water and therefore, when CuBr is added to water without strong stirring or vortexing, the white crystalline CuBr dissolves at a very low rate, which must represent the rate limiting step of the disproportionation process. Once in solution, CuBr disproportionate rapidly to produce Cu(0) and a blue-green CuBr2/Me6-TREN solution (Fig. 1). In this study (see Experimental section for details), complete disproportionation of CuBr occurs after 5 min stirring of CuBr in H2O containing Me6-TREN. However, disproportionation for 30 min was carried out to rule out the presence of any trace amount of insoluble CuBr in the solution. To this solution, a deoxygenated mixture of monomer and initiator was injected via a deoxygenated syringe equipped with a long needle. The polymerization started immediately and the monomer conversion was determined by 500 MHz 1H NMR spectroscopy at different reaction times.

In the polymerization experiments performed at 0, 13 and 25 °C, both the disproportionation and the polymerization were carried out with the reaction mixture equilibrated at the specified temperature. Experiments at 0 and 13 °C were carried out by using ice-water and p-xylene/dry-ice bath, respectively. For polymerization targeted at 0 °C the thermostat...
reading was between 0 and 1 °C and the reaction mixture was in liquid state. Unexpectedly, \( k_{pp} \) values obtained from the kinetic plots for OEOMEA at 0, 13 and 25 °C (Fig. 2) and for HEA at 0 and 25 °C (Fig. 4) at \([\text{monomer}]_0/[I]_0/[CuBr]_0/[\text{Me}_6\text{-TREN}]_0 = 20/1/0.4/0.4\) decrease with increasing polymerization temperature. These reactions at 0 °C (Fig. 2a and b), 13 °C (Fig. 2c and d) and 25 °C (Fig. 2e and f) exhibited first order rates of polymerization with respect to monomer concentration, a linear dependence of the number average molecular weight \(M_n\) versus conversion, or theoretical molar mass, and narrow molecular weight distributions (Fig. 3).

A qualitative analysis of the Cu(0) particle size obtained during the disproportionation of CuBr/Me\(_6\text{-TREN}\) revealed much smaller dimensions at 0 °C (Fig. 5a) than at 25 °C (Fig. 5b). For the disproportionation at 0 °C the measured temperature was between 0 and 1 °C and the reaction mixture was a liquid. Unexpectedly, at 0 °C water appeared to stabilize the Cu(0) as a stable suspension in a similar way as DMSO does over a large temperature range\(^{43,46}\) and therefore, a retardation of the nucleation and growth processes of atomic Cu(0) generated “in situ” was observed. In DMSO the colloidal Cu(0) particles exhibit an absorption at \(\lambda \sim 600\) nm along with a scattering effect.\(^{43,46,89}\) Similarly, UV-visible spectra of the colloidal Cu(0) generated in H\(_2\)O “in situ” by disproportionation of CuBr at 0 °C exhibited a weak and broad absorption between 375 and 550 nm (Fig. 6a) due to the absorption and scattering by fine Cu(0) particles. For the disproportionation in H\(_2\)O at 0 °C the Cu(0) particles do not settle completely even 5 min after stirring was interrupted (Fig. 6a).\(^{43,46,89}\) As a result, the absorption spectra at 0 °C (Fig. 6a) could not be normalized to zero at any wavelength. Conversely, in the absorption spectra for the disproportionation of CuBr in H\(_2\)O at 25 °C no such effect of Cu(0) was observed and the absorption at 500 nm could be normalized to zero (Fig. 6b). The degree of disproportionation of CuBr in H\(_2\)O for both 0 and 25 °C were estimated by taking the absorbance of CuBr \(_2\) to be the height of the peak at 700 nm and the baseline as the absorbance at 400 nm which is almost a flat region in the case of absorption spectra at 0 °C.\(^{43}\) It should be noted that, at both temperatures, 100% (± 4%) disproportionation of CuBr into Cu(0) and CuBr\(_2\) was observed by UV-visible spectroscopy, by comparing the absorbance of the disproportionated mixture with that of the control solution containing the expected concentration of
CuBr\textsubscript{2}/Me\textsubscript{6}-TREN solution in H\textsubscript{2}O (Fig. 5). A more detailed investigation of the control of the Cu(0) particle size at various temperatures and their correlation with the $k_{\text{app}}^p$ will be reported elsewhere.

The aqueous SET-LRP catalyzed with “in situ” generated Cu(0) of OEOMEA was also carried out at −10 and −22 °C (Fig. 7). In these experiments the disproportionation of CuBr was carried out at 0 °C to prevent the freezing of the disproportionation mixture. The mixture of monomer and initiator was cooled to the polymerization temperature added to the flask containing Cu(0) and CuBr\textsubscript{2}/Me\textsubscript{6}-TREN obtained by disproportionation at 0 °C, and immediately immersed into the bath cooled at polymerization temperature. However, unlike the previous trend observed where $k_{\text{app}}^p$ increased by lowering the temperature from 25 to 0 °C (Fig. 2 and 3), the $k_{\text{app}}^p$ obtained at −22 and −10 °C were lower than the value obtained at 0 °C (Fig. 6). This is as under these conditions the reaction mixtures were in a frozen state throughout the polymerization. It is remarkable that even at such a low temperature and under heterogeneous reaction condition $k_{\text{app}}^p$ values as high as 0.09 min\textsuperscript{−1} and 0.38 min\textsuperscript{−1} were obtained at −22 °C and −10 °C, respectively. This demonstrates that “in situ” generated Cu(0) is an extremely reactive catalyst for the activation of alkyl halides.

It should be noted that the extremely high catalytic activity of Cu(0) atoms was demonstrated as early as 1968 by P. L. Timms through the reductive dehalogenation reaction of volatile boron–chlorine compounds by Cu(0) atoms, condensed together on a liquid nitrogen-cooled surface (−196 °C).90 Followed by this experiment, the dehalogenation of ethyl bromide at −196 °C by Cu(0) atoms to give the coupling product butane as well as the disproportion product was also reported by the same laboratory.91 In a further report...
from the Chanon laboratory the reaction of substituted bromo-
benzene with Cu(0) atoms at −108 °C was shown to generate
substituted phenyl radicals and a SET mediated catalysis
mechanism by Cu(0) to generate phenyl radicals was pro-
posed.93 In addition to these studies with atomic Cu(0), a vast
amount of evidences for the high catalytic activity of Cu(0)
was reported for Ullmann reaction and polymerization
on the surface of Cu(0). For instance, a critical analysis of the
Ullmann reaction on Cu(111) surface was reported in 2011 by
the Wang laboratory (Scheme 2).93 In this study, the intermedi-
ates involved were visualized at single-molecule resolution by
STM. The authors demonstrated that although the activation
of alkyl halides takes place at temperatures as low as −98 °C,
the dissociation of the Cu atom on the surface from the aryl
group needs a higher temperature and complete dissociation
occurs only when the sample was annealed at 175 °C.93 This
demonstrated strong adsorption of organic species on the
surface of Cu(0) and supports the similar polymer adsorption
experiments reported here. A detailed discussion on the cataly-
sis of Cu(0) for alkyl and aryl halides can be found in a recent
review from our laboratory.94 This report clearly indicates that
the activation of alkyl or aryl halides by Cu(0) takes place by
consecutive adsorption and desorption steps where desorption
is relatively a slow process compared to the activation. In this
present report, the effect of a slow desorption process of a
growing amphiphilic polymer radical from the Cu(0) surface in
aqueous phase has been demonstrated to result in an un-
expectedly low bimolecular termination of the propagating
radicals.

Analysis of the chain-end functionality of poly(OEOMEA) and
PHEA prepared by aqueous SET-LRP catalyzed with Cu(0)
generated “in situ”

MALDI-TOF experiments were carried out for the analysis of
the chain-ends of poly(OEOMEA) with 2-(4-hydroxyphenylazo)
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1H NMR spectrum recorded in CDCl₃ along with the assignment of the various protons after thioetherification of bromine chain-end by “thio-bromo” click reaction⁷⁻⁵⁰,⁷⁷,⁷⁸,₉₆ of poly(OEOMEA) at 100% monomer conversion (a), and evolution of chain-end functionality with conversion (b) for the aqueous SET-LRP of OEOMEA mediated by “in situ” generated Cu(0) using OEOMEBr as initiator. Reaction conditions: [OEOMEA]/[I]/[CuBr]/[Me₆-TREN]₀ = 20/1/0.4/0.4, [OEOMEA] = 1.8, M, at 0 °C. 1H NMR resonances from residual diethyl ether and acetone present with the poly(OEOMEA) is indicated with “•” and “•", respectively.

1H NMR spectrum recorded in acetone-d₆ along with the assignment of the various protons after thioetherification of bromine chain-end by “thio-bromo” click reaction⁷⁻⁵⁰,⁷⁷,⁷⁸,₉₆ of PHEA at 100% monomer conversion for the aqueous SET-LRP of PHEA mediated by “in situ” generated Cu(0) using OEOMEBr as initiator. Reaction conditions: [HEA]/[I]/[CuBr]/[Me₆-TREN]₀ = 20/1/0.4/0.4, [HEA] = 1.8, M, at 0 °C. 1H NMR resonances from residual diethyl ether and acetone present with the PHEA and acetone-d₆ are indicated with “*” and “*", respectively.

Fig. 8 [Polymer – Br]ᵣ(%) = \left[\frac{[I]₀ - [\text{Dead polymer}]}{[I]₀}\right] × 100 \quad (3)

where \( t \) = time in seconds, and [Dead polymer], is the concentration of the dead polymer at time \( t \). \( k_{p}^{PP} = k_{p} \ [P'] \) = 4.61 min⁻¹ (for aqueous SET-LRP of OEOMEA at 0 °C). Under the given conditions the expected [Polymer-Br], in the absence of termination = [I]₀ = 0.09 M. To determine [Dead polymer], we assume \( k_{t} = 1 × 10^{4} \) and series of values for \( k_{p} \) for the estimation of \([P']\). In Fig. 10, [Polymer-Br]% (eqn (3)) is shown assuming the value of \( k_{p} \) (M⁻¹ s⁻¹) = (a) 1 × 10⁵; (b) 3 × 10⁴; (c) 5 × 10⁴.

The precise values of \( k_{p} \) and \( k_{t} \) for OEOMEA at 0 °C are not available. Thus, it was assumed that the \( k_{p} = 9.97 × 10^{4} \) M⁻¹ s⁻¹ of dodecyl acrylate at −3 °C, as obtained by pulsed laser polymerization (PLP), can be used in this case due to the similar chain length of the monomer side groups of OEOMEA and dodecyl acrylate which would take into account monomer diffusion effects.⁹⁸ However, the \( k_{p} \) values obtained by PLP shows that they are influenced by several factors,⁹⁸ such as monomer concentration and solvent polarity, which in principle should not play a role in the propagation step.⁹⁸ Using \( k_{t} = 10^{4} \) M⁻¹ s⁻¹ it can be observed that when \( k_{p} \) is set as 10⁸ M⁻¹ s⁻¹ there is absolutely no chain-end functionality left at 100% monomer conversion. Only at a \( k_{p} = 5 × 10^{4} \) M⁻¹ s⁻¹ there is about 68% chain-end functionality remaining at 100% monomer conversion. As expected, in this case the higher the \( k_{p} \), the higher is the [Polymer-Br], since \( k_{t} \) is assumed to be constant at 10⁸ M⁻¹ s⁻¹ (eqn (2) and (3)). Therefore, at \( k_{p} = 9.97 × 10^{4} \) M⁻¹ s⁻¹ for OEOMEA at [OEOMEA]/[I]/[CuBr]/[Me₆-TREN]₀ = 20/1/0.4/0.4 at 0 °C, for which \( k_{p}^{PP} = 4.61 \) min⁻¹, instead of 0% chain-end functionality expected from the linear regression of eqn (2), experimental determination of the polymer chain-end functionality. In order to explain such a high extent of chain-end functionality we must consider that the only way to overcome the diffusion controlled bimolecular termination under these reaction conditions is to reduce the concentration of the active radicals in solution.

Fig. 9

Fig. 10 Linear regression of eqn (2) to determine the extent of active bromine chain-end functionality [polymer-Br]ᵣ of poly(OEOMEA) for aqueous SET-LRP of OEOMEA at \( k_{p}^{PP} = 4.61 \) min⁻¹ mediated by “in situ” generated Cu(0), assuming \( k_{t} = 1 × 10^{8} \) M⁻¹ s⁻¹ and of \( k_{p} \) (M⁻¹ s⁻¹) = (a) 1 × 10⁵; (b) 3 × 10⁴; (c) 5 × 10⁴.
In this instance, the $k_{pp}^{app}$ is extremely high and still the kinetic is first order on $[P]$ which indicates that a very high $[P]$ (7.68 $\times$ $10^5$ M for $k_{pp}^{app} = 4.614$ min$^{-1}$, assuming a $k_p = 1$ $\times$ $10^4$ M$^{-1}$ s$^{-1}$) is present in the system at any given time. However, it should be noted that during SET-LRP, the activation takes place by a Cu(0) atoms present on the surface of the Cu(0) nanoparticles. This activation method requires the adsorption of the dormant polymer chain on the Cu(0) surface and a SET from the Cu(0) atom to the C–Br moiety of the dormant polymer chain, which is subsequently followed by its desorption from the Cu(0) surface. We hypothesize that during SET-LRP, the newly generated polymer containing the propagating radical on the Cu(0) surface remains in the adsorbed state while is able to propagate and undergo deactivation by CuBr$_2$, but the diffusion controlled bimolecular termination process is suppressed in its adsorbed state (Scheme 3).

It should be noted that SET-LRP is a heterogenous process that proceeds by the Langmuir–Hinshelwood mechanism in which the activation process takes place by SET on the Cu(0) surface. Therefore, unlike a homogeneous polymerization, in SET-LRP the adsorption–desorption dynamics of the polymer on Cu(0) surface should greatly influence the diffusion controlled bimolecular termination. SET-LRP in general produces polymers with high chain-end functionality since it does not require PRE like other living radical polymerization techniques. Our laboratory demonstrated the synthesis of PMA with 100% chain-end functionality by SET-LRP in DMSO with relatively low $k_{pp}^{app}$ values. However, the extent of bimolecular termination continuously increases with the increase of the surface area because of increased $k_{pp}^{app}$ values. For instance, 6% termination was obtained at $k_{pp}^{app} \sim 0.01$ min$^{-1}$ using 0.5 cm of Cu(0) wire, whereas 13% termination was obtained at $k_{pp}^{app} \sim 0.07$ min$^{-1}$ using 5.0 cm of Cu(0) wire for SET-LRP of MA targeting DP = 222 in DMSO. Synthesis of PMA by SET-LRP in DMSO does not suppress the bimolecular termination to such a great extent since both PMA and DMSO are polar and adsorption of PMA on the Cu(0) surface is not strongly favored although it takes place. The 88% chain-end functionality of the poly(OEOMEA) prepared by aqueous SET-LRP by “in situ” generated Cu(0) at $k_{pp}^{app} = 4.61$ min$^{-1}$ is expected to be $\sim$0% while the experimental value is 88%. This dramatic difference between theoretical and experimental chain-end functionality can be explained by considering an amplified adsorption of amphiphilic polymers.

Scheme 3  The proposed mechanism for aqueous SET-LRP by “in situ” generated Cu(0) nanoparticle obtained by disproportionation of CuBr/Me$_6$-TREN.
containing a hydrophobic backbone and hydrophilic side groups on the hydrophobic surface of Cu(0). Therefore, a longer lifetime of the polymer radical in the adsorbed state reduces the rate of bimolecular termination.

The adsorption–desorption of these polymers in aqueous medium is a dynamic process.9 Nevertheless, in SET-LRP the activation of alkyl halides via SET is dependent on the area of Cu(0) wire11 or powder,58 which means both the initiator and the polymer must adsorb on the surface of the catalyst.9 The fraction of the polymer chain adsorbed on the Cu(0) should be extremely small compared to the total amount of polymer under the LRP condition. This is in agreement with the established Langmuir–Hinshelwood mechanism for activation.9,90–94

Effect of catalyst and ligand concentrations on the aqueous SET-LRP of OEOEA mediated by “in situ” generated Cu(0)

Aqueous SET-LRP of OEOEA at 25 °C with [monomer]0/[I]0/[CuBr]0/[Me6-TREN]0 = 20/1/0.4/0.4 yielded k_app = 1.60 min⁻¹. The same polymerization carried out with [I]0/[CuBr]0/[Me6-TREN]0 = 1/0.8/0.8 and [I]0/[CuBr]0/[Me6-TREN]0 = 1/1.2/1.2 for OEOEA generated k_app = 5.35 min⁻¹ and k_app = 6.31 min⁻¹ and a second linear kinetic with lower k_app after more than 95% conversion (Fig. 11). For the last two experiments, the chain-end functionality decreased to 73% and 62%, respectively at 99% conversion (Fig. 12). Under similar reaction conditions at [I]0/[CuBr]0/[Me6-TREN]0 = 1/0.2/0.2, a linear kinetic with k_app = 0.42 min⁻¹ and 91% polymer chain-end functionality at 100% conversion were obtained (Fig. 12).

Reaction conditions for near-quantitative chain-end functionality

The very fast aqueous SET-LRP of OEOEA with [OEOEA]0/[I]0/[CuBr]0/[Me6-TREN]0 = 20/1/0.4/0.4 yielded at 0 °C k_app = 4.61 min⁻¹ (Fig. 3a) and an 88% chain-end functionality of the polymer at 100% monomer conversion. Higher chain-end functionality is required for preparative purposes. Therefore, reaction conditions chosen to increase the chain-end functionality with the same concentration of CuBr but different concentrations of ligand were investigated. Under SET-LRP with CuBr/Me6-TREN = 0.4/0.2 a maximum of 55% conversion was obtained after 8 min (Fig. 13a and b). SET-LRP with CuBr/Me6-TREN = 0.4/0.3 produced 96% conversion after 6 min with a second linear kinetic regime (Fig. 13c and d). Optimum conditions were obtained at CuBr/Me6-TREN = 0.4/0.32 where k_app = 1.93 min⁻¹ and a single linear kinetic regime was observed (Fig. 13e and f). Poly(OEOEA) obtained under these conditions has 94% chain-end functionality at 100% monomer conversion.

Gel formation on the surface of the catalyst during aqueous SET-LRP of HEA catalyzed with activated Cu(0) wire

Aqueous SET-LRP of HEA initiated with OEOEBR and catalyzed with Cu(0) wire (4.5 cm, 0.812 mm diameter) activated by hydrazine treatment59 at [HEA]0/[I]0/[Me6-TREN]0 = 20/1/0.2 in H2O at 25 °C produced a thick gel-like PHEA on the surface of Cu(0) (Fig. 11a) and 88% polymer chain-end functionality at 100% monomer conversion. Higher chain-end functionality is required for preparative purposes. Therefore, reaction conditions chosen to increase the chain-end functionality with the same concentration of CuBr but different concentrations of ligand were investigated. Under SET-LRP with CuBr/Me6-TREN = 0.4/0.2 a maximum of 55% conversion was obtained after 8 min (Fig. 13a and b). SET-LRP with CuBr/Me6-TREN = 0.4/0.3 produced 96% conversion after 6 min with a second linear kinetic regime (Fig. 13c and d). Optimum conditions were obtained at CuBr/Me6-TREN = 0.4/0.32 where k_app = 1.93 min⁻¹ and a single linear kinetic regime was observed (Fig. 13e and f). Poly(OEOEA) obtained under these conditions has 94% chain-end functionality at 100% monomer conversion.
the Cu(0) wire (Fig. 14). The thickness of the gel increased with monomer conversion. Only a negligible amount of polymer was present in the aqueous phase of the reaction mixture. This gel was insoluble in common organic solvents, indicating that the PHEA was generated by crosslinking of the polymer chains adsorbed on the surface of the Cu(0) wire. The formation of gel-like PHEA was also reported by our laboratory when ethyl α-bromoisobutyrate (EBiB) was used as initiator for aqueous SET-LRP of HEA catalyzed with activated Cu(0) wire.10 The same gel structure was obtained during SET-LRP of HEA in mixtures of protic solvents and H2O when the water content was 70% or higher.10 In water, when Cu(0) wire is used as a catalyst, a large number of amphiphilic polymers with hydrophobic backbones and hydrophilic side groups in their dormant or radical form can be adsorbed on the surface of the catalyst. After SET to the dormant polymers (alkyl halides) from the Cu(0), the local concentration of the polymer radicals on the Cu(0) surface should be much higher compared to a homogeneous reaction medium. The addition of external CuBr2 eliminates the gel formation. This also indicates that at the beginning of the polymerization the concentration of CuBr2 which is generated via the disproportionation of CuBr is not sufficient to effectively suppress the large amount of polymer radicals. This is expected, as water is a highly polar solvent and accelerates the SET process that proceeds through a polar transition state.47 The exact mechanism of gel formation during SET-LRP of HEA by activated Cu(0) wire in the absence of external CuBr2 has previously provided inspiration for the research reported here. We must recall that Cu(0) is a better electron donor than CuX in SET reactions.9 At the same time CuX2 is both mediating the reversible termination and acts as a SET acceptor and therefore they undergo neighboring group or anchimeric assisted intramolecular and intermolecular chain transfer reactions that crosslink the polymers from the surface of the Cu(0) wire. The addition of 0.2 equivalents of external deactivator, CuBr2, to the reaction mixture during SET-LRP of HEA using Cu(0) wire as catalyst at [HEA]0/[I]0/[Me6-TREN]0/[CuBr]2 = 20/1/0.4/0.2 produced perfectly soluble PHEA with kapp = 0.17 min⁻¹ and linear kinetics up to 99% monomer conversion in 30 min (Mθ of the acetylated PHEA = 2836, Mθ(GPC) = 3210, Mθ/Mn = 1.21). This confirms that the gel formation on the surface of Cu(0) wire in the absence of external CuBr2 is due to the high concentration of polymer radicals that are less reactive for bimolecular termination than for neighboring repeat units from the surface of Cu(0) wire. SET-LRP of HEA in dipolar aprotic solvents, such as DMSO, MeOH, and mixtures of MeOH with less than 70% water generate soluble PHEA.10 These solvents and solvent mixtures decrease the hydrophobic effect of the PHEA backbone and therefore increase the desorption rate of the polymer from the surface of the Cu(0) wire.

In water, when Cu(0) wire is used as a catalyst, a large number of amphiphilic polymers with hydrophobic backbones and hydrophilic side groups in their dormant or radical form can be adsorbed on the surface of the catalyst. After SET to the dormant polymers (alkyl halides) from the Cu(0), the local concentration of the polymer radicals on the Cu(0) surface should be much higher compared to a homogeneous reaction medium. The addition of external CuBr2 eliminates the gel formation. This also indicates that at the beginning of the polymerization the concentration of CuBr2 which is generated via the disproportionation of CuBr is not sufficient to effectively suppress the large amount of polymer radicals. This is expected, as water is a highly polar solvent and accelerates the SET process that proceeds through a polar transition state.47 The exact mechanism of gel formation during SET-LRP of HEA by activated Cu(0) wire in the absence of external CuBr2 has not been elucidated and it is outside the scope of this manuscript. However, this crosslinking reaction that was published previously provided inspiration for the research reported here. We must recall that Cu(0) is a better electron donor than CuX in SET reactions.47 At the same time CuX2 is both mediating the reversible termination and acts as a SET acceptor and

Fig. 13 Kinetic plots of conversion (%) and ln([M]0/([M]) vs. time (a, c and e), and experimental Mθ and vs. theoretical Mθn (b, d and f) for SET-LRP of OEOMEA in H2O at 0 °C for different concentrations of ligand for [OEOMEA] = 1.8 M, OEOMEA = 1 g, H2O = 1.1 mL (0.55 mL for the disproportionation experiment and 0.55 mL to the monomer and initiator). Reaction conditions: [OEOMEA]0/[I]0/[CuBr]0/[Me6-TREN]0 = 20/1/0.4/0.2 (a and b), [OEOMEA]0/[I]0/[CuBr]0/[Me6-TREN]0 = 20/1/0.4/0.3 (c and d), and [OEOMEA]0/[I]0/[CuBr]0/[Me6-TREN]0 = 20/1/0.4/0.32 (e and f). Experimental data in different colors were obtained from different kinetic experiments.

Fig. 14 (a) Gel formation during aqueous SET-LRP of HEA catalyzed with activated Cu(0) wire. Reaction conditions: HEA = 0.5 mL, H2O = 1 mL, [HEA]0/[I]0/[Me6-TREN]0 = 20/1/0.2, hydrazine activated 4.5 cm, 0.812 mm diameter Cu(0) wire, 25 °C.
SET Electron Donors (Reducing Agents)

\[
\text{Cu}_2\text{Te} > \text{Cu}_2\text{Se} > \text{Cu}^0 > \text{Cu}_2\text{S} > \text{Cu}_2\text{O} > \text{CuX}
\]

\[
R-\text{X} + \text{Cu}^0 \rightarrow R^* + \text{CuX}
\]

SET Electron Acceptors (Oxidizing Agents)

\[
\text{CuX}_2 > \text{CuX}
\]

\[
R^* + \text{Cu}^{2+} \rightarrow R^+ + \text{Cu}^{+}
\]

\[
\text{H-CH}_2\text{-Y} + \text{Cu}^{2+} \rightarrow \text{CH}_2\text{-Y} + \text{Cu}^{+}
\]

\[
Y = \text{COR, COOR, CN}
\]

Fig. 15 Examples of copper oxidizing and reducing species and some of their reactions.

Conclusions

The aqueous SET-LRP of the two amphiphilic monomers, OEOMEA and HEA catalyzed with “in situ” generated Cu(0) was investigated at different temperatures. The \(k_{\text{app}}\) values obtained at low temperatures are higher than those obtained at higher temperatures. This unexpected and unprecedented result was explained by the formation of smaller Cu(0) particles at lower temperatures in water. The simulation of the expected chain-end functionality of poly(OEOMEA) considering \(k_p = 10^4 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1}\) and \(k_t = 10^2 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1}\) for the case of \(k_{\text{app}} = 4.61 \text{ min}^{-1}\) of OEOMEA revealed that the chain-end functionality at complete monomer conversion should be ~0%. Nevertheless, an 88% chain-end functionality of poly(OEOMEA) was experimentally determined at 100% monomer conversion indicating that during aqueous SET-LRP mediated by “in situ” generated Cu(0) the diffusion controlled bimolecular termination process is suppressed. This high chain-end functionality does not take into account the small amount of polymer chain-ends containing –OH groups obtained by anchimerically assisted hydrolysis during SET-LRP. If this concentration would be taken into account, the extent of bimolecular termination observed during aqueous SET-LRP would be even lower. Consequently, we propose that this unexpectedly high chain-end functionality obtained by SET-LRP is the result of the growing polymer radical being adsorbed on the Cu(0) surface since the activation step takes place by Cu(0) atoms from the surface of Cu(0) particles. Hence, both the propagation and reversible deactivation steps proceed while the growing polymer radical is in the adsorbed state on the surface of the catalyst the same adsorbed polymer cannot undergo bimolecular termination before being completely desorbed from the Cu(0) surface. The gel formation around the Cu(0) wire during SET-LRP of HEA in aqueous medium using Cu(0) wire as catalyst is mediated by a neighboring group or anchimeric effect and supports the role of adsorption and desorption steps in the activation and in the reduced extent of bimolecular irreversible termination reported frequently during SET-LRP.

Experimental

Materials

Cu wire (20 gauge wire, 0.812 mm diameter from Fischer), HPLC grade water (Fischer) and hydrazine hydrate (100%, hydrazine 64%, Acros) used for the activation of Cu wire were used as received. Oligo(ethylene oxide) methyl ether acrylate (average \(M_n = 480\), Aldrich) was passed through basic alumina to remove the radical inhibitor prior being used in polymerization experiments. OEOMEBr initiator and hexamethylated tris(2-aminoethyl)amine (Me₆-TREN) were synthesized by literature procedures. Copper (0) wire (20 gauge wire, 0.812 mm diameter from Fischer) was activated with hydrazine hydrate according to a procedure elaborated in our laboratory. 2-Hydroxyethyl acrylate (Acros, 97%) was purified following a literature procedure.

Techniques

500 MHz \(^1\text{H-NMR}\) spectra were recorded on a Bruker DRX500 NMR instrument at 20 °C in \(\text{D}_2\text{O}\) and \(\text{CDCl}_3\). Gel Permeation Chromatography (GPC) analysis was performed on a Perkin-Elmer Series 20 high-performance liquid chromatograph, equipped with an LC-100 column oven maintained at 30 °C, a Nelson Analytical 900 Series integration data station, a Perkin-Elmer 785 UV-vis detector (254 nm) and two AM gel columns (500 Å, 5 μm; and 1000 Å, 5 μm). HPLC grade THF (Fisher) was used as eluent at a flow rate of 1 mL min\(^{-1}\). The number-average molecular weight (\(M_n\)) and molecular weight distribution (\(M_w/M_n\)) were determined with poly(methyl methacrylate) (PMMA) standards purchased from American Polymer Standards. PHEA was acetylated by treating with pyridine and acetic anhydride to make it soluble in THF before GPC analysis.
Typical procedure for polymerization kinetics for aqueous SET-LRP catalyzed by “in situ” generated Cu(0)

A mixture of H₂O (HPLC, 0.55 mL), and Me₆-TREN (11.25 μL, 0.042 mmol) was added to a 25 mL Schlenk tube fitted with a magnetic stir bar and a rubber septum. The mixture was degassed by purging N₂ through the solution for 30 min (rate = 2–3 bubble s⁻¹). At the same time the Schlenk tube was immersed in an ice-water bath set at 0 °C for the polymerizations carried out at 0, −10 and −22 °C. For polymerizations performed at 13 and 25 °C the Schlenk tube was immersed in a water bath set at 25 °C and in p-xylene/dry-ice bath set at 13 °C. CuBr (5.98 mg, 0.042 mmol) was then carefully added under slight positive pressure of nitrogen. The solution was stirred at 480 rpm for 30 min to generate a bluish green solution of CuBr₂/Me₆-TREN and the suspension of copper(0) powder. At the same time, to a vial with a magnetic stir bar and a rubber septum, H₂O (0.55 mL), OEOMEBr (51.97 mg, 0.104 mmol) and OEOMEA (1 g, 2.083 mmol) were charged and the vial was immersed in the cooling bath set at the polymerization temperature, and fitted and the mixture was bubbled with nitrogen for 30 min. After that, the degassed monomer/initiator solution was transferred via a degassed syringe equipped with a long needle through the septum to the bottom of the Schlenk tube with Cu(0)/CuBr₂/Me₆-TREN. The solution was allowed to polymerize. Samples containing 0.1–0.2 mL of the reaction solution were then removed for ¹H NMR and GPC analysis. Catalyst residue was removed by filtration through a column of neutral alumina prior to GPC analysis using THF as eluent. The sample for ¹H NMR spectroscopy was directly diluted with D₂O, and the conversions were determined according to the integral of the vinyl group with that of the –CH₂ groups at 3–3.9 ppm.

Typical procedure for polymerization kinetics for aqueous SET-LRP of HEA catalyzed by hydrazine activated Cu(0) wire

In a 25 mL Schlenk tube fitted with a rubber septum HEA (0.5 mL, 0.0044 mmol), Me₆-TREN (21.75 μL, 0.081 μmol), OEOMEA (91.2 μL, 0.22 μmol), CuBr₂ (9.7 mg, 0.043 mmol), and H₂O (1 mL) were added. The reaction mixture was thereafter degassed by purging N₂ through the solution for 30 min (rate = 2–3 bubbles s⁻¹). After 30 min, hydrazine-activated Cu(0) catalyst (4.5 cm of gauge 20 wire, wrapped around a Teflon-coated stirrer bar) was dropped into the Schlenk tube under positive pressure of N₂ and the Schlenk tube was placed in an oil bath thermostated at the desired temperature (25 °C) with stirring. Samples of 0.1–0.2 mL of the reaction mixture were then removed for ¹H NMR and GPC analysis. The conversions were determined by ¹H NMR spectroscopy recorded in D₂O. Catalyst residue was removed by filtration through a column of neutral alumina and PHEA was acetylated prior to GPC analysis using THF as eluent.

Typical procedure for the disproportionation of CuBr in H₂O studied by UV-Vis spectroscopy

Disproportionation experiments were performed in 3.5 mL volume Starna UV-Vis quartz cuvettes with airtight screw cap fitting. Photographs were taken with a digital camera using a white background. UV-vis spectra were recorded on a Shimadzu 1601 spectrometer with Shimadzu UV-Probe software. A mixture of deionized water (3 mL) and Me₆-TREN (10.46 mg, 0.045 mmol) was taken in the cuvette fitted with a rubber septum and a small stirring bar (5 × 2 mm, Fischer). The cuvette was immersed in a 0 °C or 25 °C water bath for the experiments targeted at 0 °C and 25 °C, respectively. For the experiment at 0 °C the thermostat reading was between 0–1 °C and the solution was in liquid state. The solution was purged with N₂ for 30 min. Followed, the white crystalline CuBr (6.52 mg, 15.15 mmol) was added carefully to the cuvette under a slightly positive N₂ started stirred immediately to generate a bluish green solution of CuBr₂/Me₆-TREN and the suspension of Copper (0) powder. The stirring was paused at a predefined time to record UV-Vis spectra 1 min after the stirring was interrupted. The stirring was resumed and UV-Vis spectra were recorded repeatedly until the complete disproportionation was obtained.

Typical procedure for chain-end functionality analysis of poly(OEOMEA) and PHEA

Time required to reach a desired amount of conversion was determined from kinetic experiments under various conditions. A new batch of experiments was carried out for monitoring chain-end functionality. After the polymerization reached desired conversion (typically within 3–6 min), ethyl acetate and Na₂SO₄ was added to the solution within a minute. The mixture was stirred for 2 min while H₂O is completely removed by Na₂SO₄. The ethyl acetate layer containing polymer was then dried under reduced pressure. The polymer was diluted with ~1 mL of acetone and predicated from diethyl ether or diethyl ether-hexane (1/2) mixture to obtain Poly(OEOMEA) and PHEA free of residual Me₆-TREN. The polymer was vacuum dried for 12 h. “Thio-bromo” click reaction was carried out by following previously reported method from our laboratory. The thioetherified product was purified once again by precipitation in diethyl ether or diethyl ether-hexane (1/2) mixture from acetone. The ¹H NMR was recorded in CDCl₃ to determine chain-end functionality.

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