The Enhancement of Biodesulfurization Activity in a Novel Indigenous Engineered *Pseudomonas putida*

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ABSTRACT

**Background:** The combustion of sulfur-rich fossil fuels leads to release of sulfur oxide pollution in the environment. In biodesulfurization process, an organism is able to remove sulfur from fossil fuels without decreasing the caloric value of those substrates. The main aim of this research was to design a recombinant microorganism to remove the highest amount of sulfur compounds in fossil fuels. **Methods:** Three genes (*dszA,B,C*) from *dsz* operon are responsible for the 4S pathway (biodesulfurization pathway) in *Rhodococcus erythropolis* IGTS8 were inserted into the chromosome of a novel indigenous *Pseudomonas putida*. The reaction catalyzed by products of *dszA,B,C* genes require FMNH$_2$ supplied by *dszD* enzyme. Thus, *pVLT31* vector harboring *dszD* gene was transferred into this recombinant strain. **Results:** The results demonstrated a higher biodesulfurization activity when the flavin reductase gene was transferred into recombinant *P. putida* harboring *dszA,B,C*. These results were approved by the Gibbs test and HPLC analysis. **Conclusion:** These analyses showed that this novel indigenous engineered *P. putida* could be a promising candidate for an industrial and environmental application for Biodesulfurization process. *Iran. Biomed. J.* 13 (4): 207-213, 2009

**Keyword:** *Pseudomonas aeruginosa, Rhodococcus erythropolis* IGTS8, *pVLT31* vector, Biodesulfurization

INTRODUCTION

The combustion of fossil fuels disseminates sulfur oxide compounds. Many researchers have been performed to develop a biocatalyst to remove organic sulfur from coal and petroleum products [1]. The conventional hydro-desulfurization technology is a high pressure and high temperature catalytic process using various transition metal catalysts. However, the biodesulfurization process using microorganisms to remove the organic sulfur from coal and petroleum products could be performed safely under mild condition. Dibenzothiophen (DBT) is generally considered as a model compound for desulfurization in fossil fuels [2].

A significant number of organisms were found to remove sulfur from DBT via the 4S pathway. In this pathway, DBT is desulfurized and converted to 2-hydroxybiphenyl (2-HBP) without degradation the carbon skeleton in this compound and thus the calorific value of the fuel is conserved [3]. The 4S pathway has been already characterized for *Rhodococcus erythropolis* IGTS8, *Mycobacterium, Pseudomonas, R. erythropolis* D-1 and *Gordilla* species [1, 4-6]. There are four genes (*dsz A,B,C,D*) which involve in the pathway and allow the sulfur to release after four-step enzymatic reaction. Three catabolic genes, *dszA,B,C*, responsible for DBT desulfurization are clustered in an operon. *DszC* enzyme catalyzes two consecutive monooxygenation reaction converting DBT to DBT sulfone and
subsequently dszA as a second monooxygenase enzyme converting the DBT sulfone to DBT sulfonate.

Finally, the dszB as a desulfinase enzyme catalyzes the rate-limiting step in the pathway to transform DBT sulfone to 2-HBP and sulfite [7, 8]. In this pathway, the monooxygenase C and A require a free FMNH₂ for their activity. Therefore, it is provided as a dszD enzyme in the form of high expression recombinant plasmid in this strain [9, 10]. In this work three genes (dszA,B,C) were inserted stably into the chromosome of newly indigenous Pseudomonas putida and a broad-host-range expression vector (pVLT31) harboring the dszD gene was transferred into this recombinant strain. The Gibbs test and HPLC analysis were applied to measure the amount of 2-HBP production in this recombinant strain and compared to that of R. erythropolis IGTS8.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

Restriction endonucleases were purchased from Fermentas (Germany). All enzymes were used in accordance with manufactures recommendation. DBT and 2-HBP were purchased from Fisher (Germany) and Gibbs reagent, 2, 6-dicholoroquinone-4-chloromide from Sigma (USA). Ethyl acetate, acetonitril and all other chemicals were purchased from Merck (Germany).

**Bacterial strain and plasmids.** The bacterial strains and plasmids used in this study are listed in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

**Media and growth conditions.** Deionized water was used to prepare all media and stock solutions.

The sulfur-free medium used in this study was a modification of the standard basal salt medium (BSM) containing (per liter) 2.44 g KH₂PO₄, 5.57 g Na₂HPO₄, 2.0 g NH₄CL, 0.2 g MgCl₂·6H₂O, 0.001 g CaCl₂·2H₂O, 0.001 g FeCl₃·6H₂O, 0.004 g MnCl₂·4H₂O, DBT as a sulfur source to the final concentration of 60 ppm and glycerol (1.6 ml l⁻¹) as a carbon source to the final concentration of 100 ppm. Occasionally, citrate was added after sterilization of medium. Citrate was used to isolate Pseudomonas strain that are resistant to antibiotic. Indigenous Pseudomonas strains were grown at 40°C. Escherichia coli strains were grown in Luria Bertani (LB) at 37°C. Transformants were selected on 1.5% (w/v) LB agar containing ampicillin or kanamycin (50 µg ml⁻¹ each).

**PCR and cloning of dszA,B,C genes in P. putida.** The genomic DNA of R. erythropolis IGTS8 was extracted by phenol/chloroform extraction method [11]. PCR was carried out for the identification and amplification of dszA,B,C genes of R. erythropolis IGTS8. The sequence of forward and reverse primers were 5’GAATTCGCGATGACTCAAC AACGAC 3’ and 5’AAAGTTTCAAGGAGGTAAG GCCGGGA 3’, respectively. Restriction sites for EcoRI and HindIII introduced at the 5’ ends of forward and reverse primers. Fast start tag DNA polymerase and a high fidelity kit (Roche, Germany) were used for PCR. The annealing temperature was 65°C. The PCR product with 3.8 kb length was purified and concentrated by using a high pure PCR product purification kit (Roche, Germany). The PCR product containing dszA,B,C genes was digested by EcoRI and HindIII and cloned into the pVLT31 containing tac promoter. Ptac dsz fusion together. pVLT31 plasmid was transformed into competent E. coli DH5. The bacteria were harvested and
Cloning of dszD gene into recombinant P. putida.

Plasmid pTZ57RT containing dszD gene of R. erythropolis IGTS8 was digested by EcoRI and HindIII restriction enzymes. dszD gene was purified and ligated in plasmid pVLT31 comprising tetracycline resistance site and tac promoter. Then, it was cloned into the recombinant P. putida containing dszA,B,C in its chromosome by electroporation method [11]. After cloning, the bacteria were cultivated in M9 medium containing tetracycline antibiotic and citrate as a carbon source. In order to identify bacteria containing dszD gene, PCR technique was employed. The nucleic acid sequences of the PCR primer were designed using conserved nucleic acid sequence of the flavin reductase enzyme of R. erythropolis IGTS8. The primers were as follow: 5’-GAA TTC ATG TCT GAC AAG CCC AAT GCC-3’ (forward) and 5’-TCT AGA CTA TTG ACC TAA CGG AGT CCG-3’ (reverse). Annealing temperature was 55°C for 1 min (30 cycles).

Quantitative Gibbs assay. Recombinant P. putida containing dszA,B,C in the chromosome and dszD on pVLT31 vector and R. erythropolis IGTS8 were grown in LB medium at 30°C. Bacteria were cultured to reached to an optical density of 2.0 at 600 nm, harvested by centrifugation and resuspended in BSM medium(400 ml) to reach to an optical density of 0.05 at 600 nm. Then supplemented by DBT in acetone (250 µl of 40 mM solution) as a sulfur source until the final concentration of DBT reached 60 ppm and glycerol (200 µl) as a carbon source until the final concentration of glycerol reached 100 ppm and shacked 200 rpm at 30°C. A volume of 40 ml of this solution was removed every 4 h and its pH was adjusted to 2 by using concentrate HCl. For Gibbs assay, the pH of solution was adjusted to 8 with 10% (w/v) sodium carbonate. Gibbs reagent (2, 6 dichloroquinon -4-chloroamide, 10 µl of a10-mM solution in acetone) was then added to the solution and kept at 30°C for 30 minute. The solution was then centrifuged (8000 × g) for 5 minute to remove cells. Absorbance of the supernatant was determined at 610 nm [11]. Biodesulfurization activity of recombinant P. putida and R. erythropolis IGTS8 was compared in 6, 12, 18, 24, 30 and 36 h. Standard Gibbs curve [8] was designed and 2-HBP production of other samples was measured based on comparing with 2-HBP concentration and OD of standard peak.

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Fig. 1. Amplification of dszA,B,C gene from Rhodococcus erythropolis IGTS8. Lane 1-3, PCR of dszA,B,C gene (3800 bp) and lane 4, molecular weight III (Roche, Germany).

**HPLC analysis.** To recognize standard peak, a certain value (0.1 mM) of pure 2-HBP was inserted in BSM medium and injected (standard peak). After sample preparation according to the Maniatis et al. [11], each sample was injected and the production of 2-HBP was monitored and the peak area on HPLC was compared with standard 2-HBP peak. The time course for DBT desulfurization for all the strains were carried out by evaluation of the producing of 2-HBP. The 2-HBP production of recombinant P. putida and R. erythropolis IGTS8 was measured after 12, 24 and 36 h. The properties of HPLC analysis were model 1100 Cecil (England), C18 column, elution phase performed with 50:50 (v/v) acetonitrile/water mobile phase at 1 ml min⁻¹. Detection was realized with an UV detector at 280 nm, flow rate 0.9 ml/min [11, 13].

**RESULTS**

**Cloning of dszA, B, C genes into the chromosome of P. putida.** dszA,B,C genes (3.8 kb) of R. erythropolis IGTS8 was amplified using PCR method (Fig. 1) and ligated into the plasmid pVLT31 under control of tac promoter to make the construct pTSOX3. Then, a 5.8-kb fragment containing dsz operon and tac promoter of pTSOX3 plasmid was digested with EcoRV restriction enzyme and ligated into EcoRV site of a suicide vector (pBSL118) which carries the mini-Tn5 transposon genes to make the construct pTSOX4. Afterwards, the construct, pTSOX4 was transferred into the E. coli CC118pir cells. To confirm the accuracy of cloning, the pESOX4 plasmid was digested by EcoRV restriction enzyme. According to Figure 2, two bands of dszA,B,C gene under heterologous tac promoter (5.8 kb) and plasmid (4.7 kb) reveal; Lane 5 and 6, plasmid without insert.

Fig. 2. Confirmation of the accuracy of cloning by digestion. pESOX4 plasmid was digested by EcoRV restriction enzyme. Lane 1, molecular weight III (Roche); lanes 2 and 3, plasmid containing insert fragment (10.5 kb); lane 4, digestion of pESOX4 by EcoRV enzyme and two bands of dszA,B,C gene under tac promoter (5.8 kb) and plasmid (4.7 kb) reveal; Lane 5 and 6, plasmid without insert.

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Fig. 4. Digestion of pTZ57RT containing dszD gene. Lane 2, marker (100 bp) (Roche, Germany), lanes 1 and 3, digestion of PTZ57R containing oxidoreductase gene by EcoRI and HindIII showing two bands of PTZ57R (2800 bp) and oxidoreductase gene (586 bp); lane 4, band of non-cut pTZ57R plasmid.

**Southern-blot.** To confirm the presence of dszA, B, C gene into the chromosome of recombinant P. putida (pTSOX4), Southern-blot was performed. Southern-blot of chromosomal DNA demonstrated location of Ptac::dsz cassette in recombinant P. putida. According to Figure 3, Lane 2 is blot of chromosomal DNA of SOX4 which demonstrated the accuracy of insertion of dszA, B, C gene into chromosome of P. putida. The data confirmed that the dsz cluster was functional when stably inserted in a single-copy into the chromosome of P. putida.

**Cloning of dszD gene into recombinant P. putida.** Plasmid pTZ57RT containing dszD gene was digested by EcoRI and HindIII (Fig. 4). In Figure 4, lanes 2 and 3 reveal bands of dszD gene (586 bp) and pTZ57RT plasmid. The dszD gene was ligated in pVLT31 plasmid and transferred into recombinant P. putida. Oxidoreductase gene is necessary for enhancing DBT desulfurization activity. To screen P. putida containing dszD gene, PCR technique was employed. In Figure 5, lanes 5-7 reveal PCR band of oxidoreductase gene (586 bp).

**Quantitative Gibbs assay.** Quantitative Gibbs assay was carried out based on the color change of the solution. The time course for DBT desulfurization of Recombinant P. putida (containing dszA, B, C in its chromosome and dszD on pVLT31 plasmid) and R. erythropolis IGTS8 was carried out by measuring the release of 2-HBP using quantitative Gibbs assay. 2-HBP production of samples were measured based on comparing with concentration and OD of standard Gibbs curve. The highest value of 2-HBP production (0.229 mM) by recombinant P. putida was achieved between 16-20 h. The 2-HBP production of R. erythropolis IGTS8 was 0.039 mM and 0.239 mM after 18 and 36 h, respectively and the highest value of 2-HBP production (0.239 mM) by R. erythropolis IGTS8 was achieved after 36 h and this increasing was continued (Fig. 6A).

**HPLC assay.** HPLC analysis was carried out by evaluating the production of 2-HBP. The 2-HBP production of recombinant P. putida and R. erythropolis IGTS8 was measured after 12, 24 and 36 h using the high-performance liquid chromatography method. The 2-HBP production in this comparison was monitored by comparing the peak area of each sample on HPLC. The data obtained from HPLC analysis showed that 2-HBP production of recombinant P. putida (0.192 mM) was higher than that of Rhodococcus erythropolis IGTS8 (0.047 mM) in 21 h. Biodesulfurization activity of R. erythropolis IGTS8 was low in primary 21 h, and increased after 22 h and 2-HBP production of recombinant P. putida and R. erythropolis IGTS8 was 0.229 mM and 0.196 mM, respectively after 36 h (Fig. 6B).
Fig. 6. Comparison of 2-HBP production by Rhodococcus erythropolis IGTS8 and recombinant P. putida by (A) Gibbs assay (B) HPLC analysis. (A) series 1 represents R. erythropolis IGTS8 and series 2 represents recombinant P. putida. (B) series 1 represents recombinant P. putida and series 2 represents R. erythropolis IGTS8.

DISCUSSION

Economical analysis indicate that designing a recombinant industrial strain depends on the enhancing of desulfurization rate and significant improvements in the stable biocatalysts adapted to the extreme conditions encountered in petroleum refining [14]. R. erythropolis IGTS8 is the most studied bacterium having the genes and enzymes responsible for DBT degradation. The rate of biodesulfurization activity and the stability of this bacterium in oil and petroleum are low.

In addition, sulfur compounds inhibit desulfurizing promoter in this organism [3, 15]. The strategy in the metabolic engineering is to change the host strain for the dsz genes entirely and promoter replacement for the expression of the dsz genes in a heterologous host [16, 17]. Gallardo et al. [12] previously reported that the dszA,B,C gene from R. erythropolis IGTS8 could be engineered as a DNA cassette under the control of heterologous regulatory signals to increase the ability of P. putida K2442 and Pseudomonas aeruginosa PG201 to efficiently desulfurize DBT.

Moreover, Matsubara et al. [3] cloned dsz genes of R. erythropolis IGTS8 into E. coli and showed that biodesulfurization activity of recombinant E. coli increased in an acceptable level.

In this study, dszA,B,C genes were inserted stably into the chromosome of newly indigenous engineered P. putida isolated from Iranian soil. The flavin reductase gene also transferred into recombinant P. putida by pVLT31 vector. This new indigenous bacterium is an ideal biocatalyst for desulfurizing enzyme system due to the solvent-tolerant characteristic and optimum growth temperature at 40°C which is suitable for industrial biodesulfurization process. In addition, this strain produces Rhamonolipid biosurfactant which accelerates two-phase separation step in the biodesulfurization process through increasing emulsification. Moreover, it has a high growth rate which cause to remove sulfur compounds faster than R. erythropolis IGTS8 and has the highest biodesulfurization activity in shortest time. The comparison of the biodesulfurization activity of recombinant indigenous P. putida and R. erythropolis IGTS8 was performed by measuring 2-HBP production by HPLC analysis and Gibbs test. The data obtained from HPLC analysis and Gibbs assay showed that 2-HBP production of recombinant P. putida was more than that of R. erythropolis IGTS8 in primary 1-20 h. 2-HBP production of R. erythropolis IGTS8 increased after long time of cultivation (approximately 22 h). Therefore, engineered P. putida could be a promising candidate for industrial and environmental application in biodesulfurization due to removal of higher sulfur amounts from oil in the shortest time. In addition to a higher optimal growth temperature, ability in production of rhamonolipid biosurfactant and solvent toleration was the other privileges of this recombinant strain which is applicable in biodesulfurization processes.

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