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Fabrication of graphene/polylactide nanocomposites with improved properties



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ABSTRACT

For the purpose of development of graphene/polylactide composites with good performance, a compatibilizer functionalized with pyrene was synthesized by one-step ring-opening polymerization, which presented strong π - π interaction with graphene. The dispersing stability of graphene in organic solvents facilitated the fabrication of composites with uniformly distributed graphene by a solution-cast method. For the resultant composites of graphene and polylactide, the compatibilizer showed positive effects of enhancing crystallization, thermal stability and mechanical property of the composites. Moreover, electrical conductivity of the polymer matrix was greatly increased with the incorporation of graphene, and the addition of the compatibilizer did not cause an obvious change in the electrical conductivity of the resultant composites. The results implied that the compatibilizer, which was obtained by the simple and facile synthetic strategy presented herein, had great potential in the field of composites based on polymer and carbon allotropes.

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1. Introduction

Recently, polymer composites containing carbon allotropes are new class of materials, noteworthy among which graphene, a single sheet of graphite, holds remarkable thermal, electrical, and mechanical properties due to its 2D as well as one-atom-thick crystal structure [1]. With incorporation of graphene into polymer matrix, significant enhancement of properties such as electrical and thermal conductivity, mechanical strength, and flame retardancy can be achieved for prepared composites [2–5]. However, how to realize the uniform distribution and dispersion of graphene in polymer matrix without losing practical performances is a big problem we need to deal with. For this purpose, derivatives of graphene with alkyl or polymer chains have been synthesized, which can disperse or dissolve in organic solvents without aggregation for several months [6-8]. Generally, these chemical modifications of graphene were mainly conducted on the active groups of graphene, however, the definite amounts of the groups on graphene were hard to be confirmed and thus the molecular structure of synthesized derivatives of graphene was difficult to be well controlled and defined, which were not favorable to understand the structure-property relationship as well as to accurately modulate properties of prepared graphene/polymer composites. Compared with the chemical routes, physical decorations are easy to be handled without complicated modification of graphene. Different stabilizers, up to now, have been used to inhibit aggregation of graphene in aqueous solutions through $\pi - \pi$ stacking or electrostatic stabilization [9-13], and very recently, an aromatic amphiphile based on an aromatic molecular sheet was synthesized for stabilizing graphene in aqueous solution [14]. Nevertheless, the synthesis route to this stabilizer is too complex and it has not been discussed whether graphene can be dispersed in organic solvents other than water, which is particularly more important for fabrication of graphene/polymer composites, because most engineering polymers are soluble in organic solvents. These existed issues stimulus us to explore a simple method to synthesize a novel stabilizer with well-defined structure for stabilizing graphene in organic solvent and making it convenient to prepare graphene/polymer composites with uniform graphene distribution.

In the present report, a molecule containing a pyrene fragment and a poly (L-lactide) (PLA) chain was synthesized by a simple onestep ring-opening polymerization strategy in the presence of 1pyrenemethanol as an initiator. The resultant molecule was used as a stabilizer for graphene as well as a compatibilizer for development of composites based on graphene and PLA. Moreover, the interactions among PLA, graphene and the compatibilizer were investigated, and the mechanical property and electrical conductivity of the obtained composites were studied.



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2. Experimental

2.1. Materials

PLA resin (4032D) was supplied by Nature Works Co. (USA). Thermally reduced graphene (TRG) was supplied by XFNANO Materials Technology Co. Ltd. (Nanjing, China). L-lactide (purity \ge 99%) was purchased from Daigang Biomaterial Co. Ltd. (Jinan, China). 1-pyrenemethanol (analytical grade) was purchased from Alfa Co. and stannous octoate, Sn(Oct)₂, was obtained from Sigma Co. (USA). Other reagents were purchased from Zhenxing Chemical Co. (Chengdu, China) and used as received.

2.2. Synthesis of poly (L-lactide) functionalized with pyrene (Py-PLA-OH)

A graphical illustration of the synthesis route to Py-PLA-OH is shown in Fig. 1. In a typical experiment, 1-pyrenemethanol and L-lactide with a molar ratio of 1:14 were added in a glass flask and then the reactor was immersed in an oil bath at 100 °C under rigorous stirring. Sn(Oct)₂ was injected with a syringe under nitrogen, and the reaction was performed at 140 °C for 24 h. The polymerization was then quenched by cooling the reactor to 0 °C. The crude product was dissolved in chloroform and precipitated with excess methanol. After filtration, the obtained product was dried at 60 °C under vacuum for 24 h.

2.3. Preparation of TRG/PLA composite films

For the preparation of TRG/PLA composite films, a common method reported previously was used [2,20]. Py-PLA-OH and TRG with a weight ratio of 10:1 were first dispersed in *N*,*N*-dimethyl-formamide (DMF) under agitation and sonification at room temperature, and then the dispersion was mixed with PLA in DMF solution at 60 °C. After coagulation with methanol, the obtained product, which was denoted as TRG/PLA/Py-PLA, was vacuum-dried at 80 °C for 24 h and hot-pressed into sheets at 185 °C under 10 MPa and cut to the required dimensions for tests. For a comparison study, the TRG/PLA sheets without the compatibilizer, Py-PLA-OH, were also prepared by the same method.

2.4. Characterizations

The ¹H NMR measurement was performed on an NMR spectrometer (Varian Germini 400) by using CDCl₃ as a deuterated solvent. The fluorescence emission spectra were obtained from a VARIAN Cary Eclipse spectrophotometer (concentration of Py-PLA-OH, 2.0 mg/mL; Py-PLA-OH/TRG, 10:1; excitation wavelength, 340 nm). Raman spectra were recorded on a LabRAM HORIBA spectrophotometer at an excitation wavelength of 532 nm. Electron micrographs were acquired by using a transmission electron microscopy (TEM, Philips Model CM200 Netherlands) at an accelerating voltage of 120 kV. The composites were microtomed to slices of 60 nm thickness with RMC Ultra Microtome

Model MTX (USA) and collected on standard TEM grids prior to test. The diffraction behavior of PLA and its composites was studied by using a DX1000 X-ray diffractometer (XRD) equipped with a Cu Kα radiation at a generator voltage of 40 kV and a current of 40 mA. The scans were carried out at a scan rate of 2°/min. Dynamic mechanical analysis (DMA) was performed on a Dynamic Mechanical analyzer (Rheometric scientific Co.) under tension mode. The samples with a thickness of 0.3 mm were scanned from -30 to 160 °C at a heating rate of 3 °C/min. The strain amplitude and frequency of dynamic oscillatory loading was 0.02% and 1 Hz, respectively. The tensile strength (TS) and elongation at break (ε_b) of the samples were investigated using a universal testing machine (Model 4302, Instron Engineering Corporation) with a tensile rate of 5 mm/min. The testing temperature and relative humidity (RH) were 25 °C and 60%, respectively, and five parallel measurements were carried out for each sample. Thermal gravimetric analvsis (TGA) was performed under a nitrogen atmosphere on a Netzsch TG 209 F1 apparatus using a heating rate of 10 °C/min from 40 to 700 °C. The oxidation induction temperature (OIT) was evaluated in a dynamic mode described previously [15]. Samples (about 4 mg) were heated in the DSC from 40 to 550 °C at a rate of 10 °C /min with an oxygen flow of 50 mL/min, and OITs were determined by the onset of exothermic oxidation reaction of PLA shown in the calorimetric curves. A two-probe resistance measurement was carried out for determining the resistivity at room temperature with a Keithley 6517B digital electrometer when the resistance of the samples was lower than $10^8 \Omega$ (thickness of sample: 2.0 mm). PC68 Digital High Resistance Test Fixture (Shanghai Precision Instrument Co., China) was used to determine the resistance of samples higher than $10^8 \Omega$ (thickness of sample: 0.3 mm).

3. Results and discussion

Generally, the Py-PLA-OH molecule was synthesized in a simple way, and its structure was characterized by NMR spectroscopy. The ¹H NMR spectrum of molecule showed that its chemical structure was in full agreement with that presented in Fig. 1, and its molecular weight was calculated to be 2600 g/mol based on the integration areas of H_a and H_c (Fig. 2).

To investigate the interaction between Py-PLA-OH and graphene as well as the capability of Py-PLA-OH to stabilize graphene in DMF, the purchased TRG was dispersed in DMF with or without Py-PLA-OH under sonication. The resultant dispersions were kept at room temperature and their stability was shown in Fig. 3b. It can be clearly seen that a partial precipitation was happened to pure TRG within 12 h and almost a complete precipitation occurred within 24 h. However, TRG can be well stabilized and no precipitation was observed in 24 h for the dispersion with the addition of Py-PLA-OH, which may be attributed to the interaction between TRG and Py-PLA-OH.

As a further investigation, fluorescence measurement was conducted for pure Py-PLA-OH and TRG/Py-PLA-OH in DMF solutions (Fig. 4a). Py-PLA-OH showed an obvious fluorescence emission



Fig. 1. Synthesis route to Py-PLA-OH.



Fig. 2. ¹H NMR spectra of 1-pyrenemethanol and Py-PLA-OH.



Fig. 3. (a) Chemical structure of Py-PLA-OH; (b) optical photos for TRG in DMF solutions in the absence or presence of Py-PLA-OH and (c) schematic representation of TRG/ PLA composites compatibilized by Py-PLA-OH.

signal originated from pyrene fragment, however, the emission intensity was significantly suppressed after the addition of TRG, suggesting of the existence of interactions between Py-PLA-OH and graphene surfaces [14,16]. Moreover, raman analysis was performed for TRG/PLA composites with or without Py-PLA-OH (Fig. 4b). For TRG/PLA composite, the D (breathing mode of A_{1g}) and G bands (the in-plane bond-stretching motion of pairs of C sp² atoms, E_{2g} mode) of TRG were determined to be 1350 and 1592 cm⁻¹, respectively, and another peak at 1459 cm⁻¹, corresponding to the -CH₃ asymmetric bending mode of PLA, was also observed. With the addition of Py-PLA-OH, a downshift of 8 cm⁻¹ for G band was observed for TRG/PLA/Py-PLA-OH composite, which was caused by the electron-donor effect of pyrene [17]. It strongly indicated that π - π stacking was existed between TRG and pyrene of Py-PLA-OH.

The dispersion and distribution behaviors of TRG in PLA matrix were monitored by TEM (Fig. 5). Although no obvious agglomeration of TRG was observed in the TRG/PLA composite (insert Fig. 5), its distribution was not uniform, which was not favorable to enhancing the properties of polymer matrix. In contrast to TRG/PLA without Py-PLA-OH, TRG showed a good dispersion as well as a homogeneous distribution in TRG/PLA with the addition of Py-PLA-OH, indicating that Py-PLA-OH can be used as a compatibilizer for the composite as designed (Fig. 3c).

As for the physical structures and properties of the composites, the XRD curve of PLA showed three main peaks at 16.7°, 19.0° and



Fig. 4. (a) Emission spectra of Py-PLA-OH and TRG/Py-PLA-OH in DMF and (b) Raman spectra of TRG/PLA composites in the absence or presence of Py-PLA-OH.



Fig. 5. TEM images of TRG/PLA composites in the absence or presence of Py-PLA-OH. The insert figures represent a higher magnification (Bar = 200 nm).

22.2° (Fig. 6a), attributing to its α form [18], and with the addition of TRG, the XRD peaks of the obtained composite remain nearly unchanged except for the decreased relative intensity of the peak at 16.7°, which illustrated that the crystallization structure of PLA became less perfect in the composites. However interestingly, the peak intensity was increased by adding Py-PLA-OH in the composite. Besides that, both the TRG/PLA composites with or without Py-PLA-OH did not present diffraction peaks at 12.0° or 26.0°, suggesting that there did not exist the aggregation of TRG and the molecule in PLA was close to the form of single-sheet [19,20].

Fig. 6b shows the dynamic tensile storage moduli, E', of PLA and TRG/PLA composites as a function of temperature. The E' was slightly increased after adding TRG in the polymer matrix below glass transition temperature, as compared with pure PLA. Moreover, a higher E' of the composite was obtained with the addition of Py-PLA-OH. This effect demonstrated that not only the dispersion of TRG was important for improving the mechanical property of the composite, but its distribution, which was enhanced by adding Py-PLA-OH (Fig. 5), was even more significant. To further know the effect of incorporation of TRG on the mechanical property of the composites, the TS and ε_b were measured for the composites with and without Py-PLA-OH. As illustrated in Table 1, the neat PLA showed a TS of 64.1 ± 3.1 MPa and an ε_{b} of 8.1 ± 0.7%, while the incorporation of TRG could only induce a slight increase in the TS. Compared with that, the addition of Py-PLA-OH showed remarkable effect of increasing the TS to 78.8 ± 3.4 MPa, which was attributed to the good dispersion of TRG in PLA matrix in the presence of the compatibilizer. Nevertheless, the $\varepsilon_{\rm b}$ was still too low to realize the real application of the PLA-based materials. To solve the problem, therefore, poly(ethylene glycol) containing pyrene as a terminal group, which was synthesized via the coupling reaction between 1-pyrenemethanol and carboxyl-terminated poly(ethylene glycol) methyl ethers using *N*,*N*'dicyclohexyl carbodiimide/4-dimethylamiopryidine as catalysts and marked as Py-PEG, has been used as both the compatibilizer and plasticizer for the PLA/TRG composites. The $\varepsilon_{\rm b}$ of the resultant composite was increased by 383% compared with the TRG/PLA composite, while its TS was maintained to be 38.4 MPa, which meant that Py-PLA-OH can be replaced by Py-PEG as a multi-functional additive, and the detailed structure–property relationship of the TRG/PLA/Py-PEG composites will be discussed in our future work.

Generally for layered composites, their thermal stability is greatly affected the heat and mass barrier effects of filler [21,22]. As well known, graphene is a good mass barrier but a poor heat barrier, but their roles on how to affect the pyrolysis rate of polymer composites are difficult to be well realized due to the competition and contradiction between the effects of heat and mass barriers. Fig. 6c and d shows the TGA and DTG results of neat PLA and TRG/PLA composites, respectively. The initial degradation temperature (T_i) of TRG/PLA was lower than that of neat PLA, which can be attributed to that the good heat conductivity of TRG made PLA easy to be pyrolyzed, while the increased temperature of maximum degradation (Tmax) for TRG/PLA was mainly caused by the mass barrier effect of TRG nanolayers (shown in Table 2). With the addition of Py-PLA-OH, the T_i of the obtained composite was increased close to that of PLA and its T_{max} was still higher than PLA. To further confirm the antioxidant behavior, OIT measurement were conducted on the neat PLA and its composites. As shown in Table 2, OIT of PLA was determined to be lowered by



Fig. 6. Physical structures and properties of neat PLA and its composites. (a) XRD patterns; (b) storage modulus observed from DMA measurement; (c) TGA and (d) DTG curves.

Table 1

Mechanical property of neat PLA and its composites.

| Samples | Tensile strength (MPa) | Elongation at break (%) | |
|-------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|--|
| PLA | 64.1 ± 3.1 | 8.1 ± 0.7 | |
| TRG/PLA | 69.6 ± 2.6 | 4.3 ± 0.5 | |
| TRG/PLA/Py-PLA-OH | 78.8 ± 3.4 | 6.2 ± 0.8 | |
| TRG/PLA/Py-PEG | 38.4 ± 1.8 | 23.2 ± 1.1 | |

Table 2

TGA results and OITs of neat PLA and its composites.

| Samples | <i>T</i> _{5%} (°C) | T_{\max} (°C) | Char residue (%) 700 °C | OIT (°C) |
|-------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------|----------|
| PLA | 306.2 | 327.9 | 0.23 | 206.2 |
| TRG/PLA | 274.0 | 360.1 | 0.44 | 197.9 |
| TRG/PLA/Py-PLA-OH | 304.7 | 352.7 | 0.39 | 204.2 |

8.3 °C after the incorporation of TRG and the presence of Py-PLA-OH induced an increase of OIT to 204.2 °C of the composite, which was in agreement with the TGA results. Therefore, it can be concluded that the good distribution and dispersion of TRG in PLA were favorable to reconcile the contradiction between the two barriers.

The electrical conductivity of the TRG/PLA composites was increased with increasing the weight concentration of TRG in PLA matrix due to the high electrical mobility of graphene (Fig. 7). Under the same concentration of graphene, the electrical conductivity of the composites we prepared was higher than other composites based on PLA and graphene [22,23], which implied of the formation of a dense conductivity network. The electrical conductivity of TRG/PLA composites was slightly decreased, because a good



Fig. 7. Electrical conductivity of neat PLA and TRG/PLA composites in the presence or absence of Py-PLA-OH.

distribution of TRG in the matrix made itself separate from each other, and the connection between them was too poor to form a good circuit, especially under the low content of TRG, and a similar phenomenon was described before [24].

4. Conclusions

The work presents a simple ring-opening polymerization method to synthesize a compatibilizer, a polymer with a terminal group of pyrene, for PLA and graphene, which can effectively stabilize graphene in organic solvent and make it convenient for fabrication of graphene/polymer composites with uniform distribution of filler. In addition, the compatibilizer showed obvious effects on the improvement of crystallization, thermal stability and mechanical property of the TRG/PLA composites. The electrical conductivity of PLA was improved significantly by the incorporation of TRG, and it remained high with the addition of Py-PLA-OH. It can be clearly anticipated that the strategy presented here will provide new opportunities for fabrication of graphene-functionalized composites with uniform structures and good performances.

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