CO₂ sequestration by methanogens in activated sludge for methane production

Nazlina Haiza Mohd Yasin, Toshinari Maeda, Anyi Hu, Chang-Ping Yu, Thomas K. Wood

Department of Biological Functions Engineering, Graduate School of Life Science and Systems Engineering, Kyushu Institute of Technology, 2-4 Hibikino, Wakamatsu-ku, Kitakyushu 808-0196, Japan

Research Center for Advanced Eco-fitting Technology, Kyushu Institute of Technology, 2-4 Hibikino, Wakamatsu-ku, Kitakyushu 808-0196, Japan

Key Laboratory of Urban Environment and Health, Institute of Urban Environment, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Xiamen 361021, China

Department of Chemical Engineering, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16802-4400, USA

Highlights

- Methane (CH₄) produced stems from CO₂ sequestration by methanogens.
- Enriched methanogens from WAS was dominated by an active archaeal community.
- CO₂ which has a single carbon atom is a profitable resource for energy production.

Abstract

Carbon dioxide (CO₂) is the main greenhouse gas; hence, processes are needed to remove it from the environment. Here, CO₂ was used as the substrate to generate methane (CH₄) by using enriched methanogens after anaerobic enrichment of waste activated sludge (WAS); therefore, we demonstrate that methanogens from WAS have significant potential for converting the greenhouse gas CO₂ into the fuel methane. Methane production was found to increase 70 fold by active methanogens in the enriched methanogens culture after 3 days in the presence of H₂ and CO₂. Throughout the process, CO₂ was completely consumed after 4 days of incubation in the vials after sparging with a mixture of H₂ and CO₂, resulting in significant biological CO₂ sequestration by methanogens. Using a mixture of H₂ and ¹³CO₂, we also demonstrated that the methane produced is due to the utilization of CO₂. Microbial community studies via by quantitative real time PCR (qRT-PCR) indicate the dominance of archaea in the enriched methanogens culture of WAS. Archaeal community studies of the enriched methanogens via high-throughput 16S rRNA sequencing also showed that the archaea consist mainly of hydrogenotrophic and aceticlastic methanogens such as Methanobacteriaceae, Methanospirillaceae and Methanosarcinaceae spp. which are actively grown in H₂ and CO₂. We envision that CO₂ gas from power plants can be directed to enriched methanogens of WAS to prevent release of this greenhouse gas while generating a useful biofuel (methane) or other valuable products using this single carbon atom.

Keywords: CO₂ sequestration, Methane, Waste activated sludge, Archaea, qRT-PCR, High-throughput sequencing

1. Introduction

The atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide (CO₂) has increased significantly from year to year and has become an issue for mitigation and control as outlined in the United Nation Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1992 and the Kyoto protocol in 1997[1,2]. Unfortunately, excess atmospheric CO₂ does not provide significant balance in the carbon cycle. In addition, CO₂ is abundant, inflammable, and nontoxic and can be used as a carbon source in producing valuable products[3]. Recent studies have been carried out to investigate CO₂ utilization by plants through photosynthesis[4,5], supercritical fluid extraction by CO₂[6], and CO₂ oxidation by catalysts to form a wide variety of chemicals such as methanol, formic acid, urea, carboxylic acid, lactones, carbonates, and other petrochemicals[1,7–11]. However, CO₂ pressurized in coal bed systems, and gasification treatment for methane...
production by carbon capture and storage (CCS) systems require fossil fired power plants, large facilities, and high energy inputs [10,12–14].

An alternative method for sustainable use of CO₂ is to convert this gas to an energy source such as methane. Thereby, this strategy can be one of the options to trap CO₂ and exploit it for other CO₂ applications to reduce the effect of global warming. In addition, this process is economical due to the low energy requirements [3,15,16]. Methane produced from indigenous anaerobic microorganisms is a safe gas which can be used as a source of electricity and energy for internal combustion engines for power generation and automobiles [17,18]. In addition, methane also can be used as a starting material for methanol, biodiesel and other hydrocarbons [19,20]. Biological methane production from CO₂ is also an exciting approach for the implementation of CO₂ capture and storage (CCS) at power plants to utilize CO₂ for bioenergy [21]. Thus, application of this system might be more beneficial by using indigenous microorganisms readily available in the environment. In this study, we use waste activated sludge (WAS) as the inoculum for CO₂ sequestration for methane production.

WAS is the most abundant waste produced by activated sludge systems in wastewater treatment plants [22]. Reported by Maeda et al. [23], WAS has been produced from the Hiagari wastewater treatment plant in Kitakyushu, Japan where about 7530 m³ of excess sludge is generated daily through the treatment of domestic sewage. To date, several attempts have been made to reduce excess sludge for biogas production [24] and other treatments such as thermal or pH treatment [25] in order to reduce the volume of WAS. Many studies have been carried out for methane production from high-molecular-weight compounds present in municipal solid waste, food waste and biomass feedstock by using WAS as a bacterial source [24,26].

Biological methane production through anaerobic digestion of WAS is divided into the four phases, hydrolysis, acidogenesis, acetogenesis and methanogenesis, and these processes are conducted by different microorganisms [18]. In these processes, organic components in WAS are the main substrate for methane production, which are degraded and converted into smaller molecules through hydrolysis, then converted to organic acids (mainly acetate) through acidogenesis and acetogenesis, and finally methane is formed through methanogenesis. Therefore, methane production from WAS itself is indeed complicated. WAS can also be a rich source of microorganisms including archaea and bacteria, which are able to produce useful products such as methane.

Theoretically, methane evolution comes from three different sources which are (i) hydrogen and carbon dioxide, (ii) acetate and (iii) formate [27]. Reported by Demirel and Scherer [27], hydrogenotrophic and acetoclastic methanogens are two of the important methanogens in methane production. Thus, WAS has potential as a microbial source to utilize carbon dioxide; however, it was difficult for us to obtain effective microbial communities which have the ability to clearly utilize carbon dioxide into methane because methane gas can be produced from WAS itself rather than from carbon dioxide sequestration by microbial activity in WAS. Hence, in order to evaluate only the microbial activity of WAS, we created conditions in which methane is not produced from WAS itself. In fact, although there exists an article reporting methane production from CO₂ as a source of carbon by using H₂ as a reductant [16], there was no evidence that the methane was derived from CO₂ as opposed to coming from the WAS itself.

In this study, instead of using high-molecular-weight organics in WAS for methane production, we used enriched methanogens in WAS to see the real potential for assimilating CO₂ as the sole source of carbon. This work demonstrates that a biofuel (methane) may be derived from CO₂ as the sole carbon source by using enriched methanogens prepared from WAS.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Sludge source and preparation

WAS was from the Hiagari wastewater treatment plant in Kitakyushu, Japan. The sludge was washed using distilled water by centrifugation as described previously [22]. The total solids content in the washed sludge was adjusted to 5% (wet sludge pellet, w/v) with distilled water prior to the preparation of inoculum (enriched methanogen). The characteristics of the raw sludge are presented in Table 1.

2.2. Inoculum preparation (inoculum enriched methanogen)

The total volume of 30 ml 5% (w/v) waste activated sludge was filled in the tightly crimped 66 ml serum vials. The serum vials were sparged with N₂ for 5 min to provide anaerobic conditions prior to the fermentation at 37 °C with shaking at 120 rpm. The methane that was produced was monitored daily. To enrich the microbial culture for methanogens in the samples, the inoculum was prepared over 40 days by periodically sparging with N₂ every 4 days. This step eliminates the trace methane from the WAS itself and provides anaerobic conditions for the indigenous microorganisms that are responsible for carbon utilization in the sludge. Then, N₂ was replaced by H₂ and the same procedure was conducted until no further methane was detected in the vials. In order to remove any residual CO₂ present in the headspace and liquid of the vials, which can contribute to methane production, the vials were further sparged with H₂ every 4 days for about 10 days until no methane was detected. Therefore, the enriched methanogen procedure takes about 50 days (Fig. 1) indicating that the activated sludge in the vials contained methanogens without substrates for further methane production from WAS. The prepared sludge was used as the inoculum of enriched methanogen for the subsequent experiments. The characteristics of the sludge after inoculum preparation (enriched methanogen) are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Raw Sludge</th>
<th>Inoculum enriched in methanogens</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>pH</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total carbohydrates</td>
<td>555 ± 3</td>
<td>238 ± 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total protein</td>
<td>537 ± 8</td>
<td>238 ± 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total COD</td>
<td>808 ± 8</td>
<td>163 ± 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Removal efficiencies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total solid</td>
<td>36.1 ± 0.2</td>
<td>39.52 ± 0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total volatile solid</td>
<td>36.1 ± 0.2</td>
<td>39.52 ± 0.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 1. Time-course of the methane yield while enriching methanogens in the waste activated sludge. N₂ sparging occurred for the first 36 days with 4 day intervals while H₂ sparging started on day 40 with 4 day intervals for 50 days.
2.3. Methane (CH₄) assay

Different sets of 66 mL serum vials with 30 mL of enriched methanogens were sparged with N₂ (control), H₂, CO₂, and a mixture of H₂ and CO₂ (4:1) for 5 min. All gases were purchased from Kifune Shoji Co., Ltd., Japan. Each experiment was conducted in triplicate. Methane production was assayed in an incubator shaker at 37 °C, 120 rpm. Biogas was monitored daily by gas chromatography as mentioned below.

2.4. Confirmation of ¹³CH₄ from ¹³CO₂

Confirmation that ¹³CH₄ produced from ¹³CO₂ was determined by sparging the samples of enriched methanogens (30 mL in 66 mL serum vials) with a mixture of H₂ and ¹³CO₂ (4:1) for 2 min. The control vial was filled with autoclaved enriched methanogens and sparged with the mixture of H₂ and ¹³CO₂. All vials were incubated at 37 °C at 120 rpm as stated in the methane assay. ¹³CH₄ production was analyzed by determination of the ¹³C/¹²C ratio of the headspace of the vials by Stable Isotope Ratio Mass Spectrometer (SIRMS) as described by Wang et al. [28].

2.5. Analytical methods

50 µL of gas from the headspace of the fermentation vials were analyzed for methane and carbon dioxide by gas chromatography using a GC-3200 gas chromatograph (GL Sciences, Japan) equipped with a thermal conductivity detector. Helium was used as a carrier gas at flow rate of 40 mL/min. Current was set at 100 mA. Methane was analyzed by a Molecular Sieve 13X 60/80 mesh column, SUS 2 m × 3 mm I.D (GL Science, Japan). The oven temperature was set at 40 °C, while the injector and detector temperature are set at 50 °C and 65 °C, respectively. Carbon dioxide was analyzed by WG-100 SUS 1.8 m × 9/16” O.D column (GL Science, Japan). The oven temperature was set at 50 °C, while the injector and detector temperature are set at 50 °C and 50 °C, respectively. Hydrogen was measured by a 6890-N gas chromatograph (Agilent Technologies, Glastonbury, CT) as described previously [22]. The measurement of organic acids was conducted by high performance liquid chromatography (Shimadzu LC-10AD) [29], pH was measured by a AS ONE compact pH meter, AS-211 (Horiba Ltd, Kyoto, Japan). Total COD was measured using COD measuring unit (COD-60A, TOA-DKK, Japan) according to the manufacturer protocol. The protein measurement was according to the Lowry method [30]. Total solids and volatile solids were measured according to the Standard Method for Water and Wastewater, APHA [31].

2.6. Total RNA extraction, cDNA synthesis and quantitative RT-PCR

Prior to the total RNA extraction, a sludge pellet was collected from the raw sludge as well as from the inoculum enriched in methanogens. A 10 mL of sludge sample was added to 2 mL of RNA later buffer (Ambion, Cat#AM7020) in RNase free Falcon tubes before centrifugation at 13,000 rpm for 2 min at 4 °C. The supernatant was discarded and the pellet was dissolved in 1 mL of RNA later buffer. The mixture was immediately transferred in 2 mL screw capped tubes before centrifuging at 13,000 rpm for 1 min. The pellet was quick frozen in dry ice with ethanol for 30 s before storage at −70 °C prior to the RNA extraction. Total RNA was extracted by an RNEasy kit (Qiagen Inc, Valencia, CA) as described by Mohd Yusoff et al. [28], cDNA was synthesized using Prime-Script RT reagent kit Perfect Real Time (TAKARA Bio Inc, Cat#RR037A) according to the manufacturer’s protocol. Five µg of total RNA was mixed with 2 µL of 5× Prime Script buffer, 0.5 µL reverse transcriptase enzyme, 0.5 µL oligo dT primer and 2 µL random primers in a 10 µL reaction mixture. The mixture was incubated at 25 °C for 10 min and 37 °C for 30 min followed by enzyme deactivation at 85 °C for 5 s. The cDNA was stored in −20 °C prior to being used for quantitative reverse transcription real-time PCR (qRT-PCR). qRT-PCR was performed using the StepOne Real Time PCR System (Applied Biosystem) with primers and probes as listed in Table 2. The real time PCR mixture of 20 µL was prepared by mixing of 100 ng of cDNA in 10 µL Taqman Fast Advance master mix (Life Technologies, Cat#444455), 0.34 µL Taqman probe (11.8 µM), and 0.72 µL of each primer (25 µM). Each template cDNA was analyzed in triplicate. The PCR amplification included UNG incubation at 50 °C for 2 min followed by polymerase activation at 95 °C for 20 min. The 40 cycles of annealing and extension were performed at 95 °C for 1 s and 60 °C for 20 s, respectively. The standard curve for the universal bacteria was constructed using Escherichia coli BW25113 from the Yale Coli Genetic Stock Center (USA). The standard curve for archaea was constructed with a mixture of Methanosaeta barkeri (JCM 10043) and Methanobacterium formicicum (JCM 10132) from the Japan Collection of Microorganisms. Genomic DNA was extracted from each pure culture using the Ultra Clean Microbial DNA Isolation kit (MOBIO, Cat#12224) prior to amplification with real time PCR using the primer sets shown in Table 2. The slope and intercept values for the universal bacterial primers and archaea primers were calculated by plotting Ct values against the logarithm of the template DNA copy number [32]. The slope and intercept values are indicated in Table 3. The calculation of copy number based on DNA concentration was according to Lee et al. [33].

2.7. High-throughput 16S rRNA sequencing

DNA extraction was performed using PowerSoil DNA Isolation kit (MO BIO Laboratory Inc, Cat#12800-50). The V6 region of archaeal 16S rRNA genes was amplified using the primer pair Illumina adaptor-linker (AG)-barcode-958F (5′-AATT TGG ANT CAA CCA CGG CGG-3′) and an equal mixture of 1048R major (5′-CCG CCA TGC ACC WC-3′) and 1048R minor (5′-CCG CRG CCA TGY ACC WC-3′) (http://vamps.mbl.edu/resources/primers.php). Each sample was tagged with a unique 8 bp barcode. The PCR reaction mixture (25 µL) contained 20–50 ng DNA template, 1× TransStart® FastPfu buffer (TransGen, Beijing, China), 0.25 mM dNTPs, 2 U of TransStart® FastPfu DNA Polymerase (TransGen) and 0.3 µM of each primer. PCR was performed under the following conditions: 94 °C for 5 min, followed by 35 cycles of 94 °C for 20 s, 57 °C for 30 s, and 72 °C for 30 s, and a cycle of 72 °C for 5 min. Each sample was amplified in triplicate, pooled and purified using the MinElute Gel Extraction Kit (Qiagen, Valencia, CA, USA). The concentration of amplicon was measured in duplicate using a Quant-iT dsDNA HS assay kit (Molecular Probes, Sunnyvale, CA, USA). All amplicons were mixed in equimolar concentration and sent to the Beijing Genomics Institute (Shenzhen, China). Paired-end sequencing (2 × 91 bp) was performed on a HiSeq 2000 instrument (Illumina Inc., San Diego, CA, USA).

The raw paired-end reads were assembled following the barcode Illumina PE sequencing (BIPIES) pipeline to improve the sequencing accuracy of the reads [34], and then the clean data were analyzed using Mothur v1.31 [35] and QIIME v1.7.0 [36]. The reads shorter than 50 bp or longer than 90 bp were discarded, and any read containing ambiguous bases (N) or incorrect barcode or primer sequences was also excluded from further analysis. The potential chimera were removed usingUCHIME. The remainder of the reads were clustered into operational taxonomic units (OTUs) using an open-reference OTU picking pipeline, where reads were clustered against the Greengenes database v13_8 [37], and any read that failed to match a reference sequence was subsequently clustered de novo (http://qiime.org/tutorials/otu_picking.html) (an identity cutoff value of 97% was used). Singletons were
for the main source of carbon. In line with after 4 days and 8 days, respectively. How- gave the highest methane yield which was as high as 70 fold greater than the other treatments (after 3 day). During the 14-day anaerobic incubation, the methane yield from the vials sparged with H$_2$ and CO$_2$ was stable and increased up to 189 ± 2 μmol mg$^{-1}$ L$^{-1}$ TS from 34 ± 7 μmol mg$^{-1}$ L$^{-1}$ TS after 3 days of incubation. The increase in methane yield was corroborated by the reduction of CO$_2$ and H$_2$ in the vials after sparging with H$_2$ and CO$_2$ (Fig. 2b). The vials sparged with H$_2$ and CO$_2$ showed complete reduction of CO$_2$ and H$_2$ after 4 days and 8 days, respectively. However, no reduction of H$_2$ was seen in the vials sparged with only H$_2$ (data not shown). Hence, the methane generated was due to the activity of the hydrogenotrophic methanogens which require CO$_2$ as the source of carbon and H$_2$ as a reducing agent in this reaction with minimal spiking of other gases such as N$_2$ (negative control), H$_2$, CO$_2$ and the mixture of H$_2$ and CO$_2$. The headspace of the control vials (first sparged with N$_2$) was replaced with the mixture of H$_2$ and CO$_2$ after 10 days of incubation. The headspace was returned to N$_2$ during 19 days of incubation. (b) The reduction ratio of H$_2$ and CO$_2$ in the enriched methanogens supplemented with a mixture of H$_2$ and CO$_2$.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Methanogen enrichment

Fig. 1 shows how the culture of 5% (w/v) WAS was enriched for methanogens. The process of periodically sparging with N$_2$ for the first 36 days and H$_2$ starting from day 40 until day 50 was carried out to ensure that the enriched methanogens culture was ready for methane production by using CO$_2$ as the sole source of carbon. Low methane production after 28 days (Fig. 1) demonstrated the low available substrate content in the broth. Also, analysis of the inoculum after 50 days showed that the amount of carbohydrates, protein, and COD were reduced significantly compared to the initial raw sludge (Table 1). The reduced carbon content in the enriched methanogen sample confirmed that the enriched methanogens use the supplied gas such as CO$_2$ as the main source of carbon. The reduction of fermentable sludge components in the enriched methanogen sample compared to raw sludge (Table 1) shows that the microbial community in the sludge consumed the available carbon and nitrogen sources through the 50 days of anaerobic degradation for methane production [27]. Thus, due to the limitation of carbon content in the WAS, the active methanogens utilized gaseous CO$_2$ for methane generation.

3.2. Methane production assay

To assay the amount of methane that could be generated from CO$_2$ by the enriched methanogens in the WAS, different gases (N$_2$ as a negative control, H$_2$, CO$_2$ and a mixture of H$_2$ and CO$_2$ at a 4:1 ratio) were added to the enriched methanogens, and the methane yield was determined (Fig. 2a). The vials sparged with both H$_2$ and CO$_2$ gave the highest methane yield which was as high as the other treatments (after 3 day). During the 14-day anaerobic incubation, the methane yield from the vials sparged with H$_2$ and CO$_2$ was stable and increased up to

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primer and probe sets used in qRT-PCR.</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Target group</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal bacteria Forward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reverse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal Archaea Forward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reverse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probe</td>
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Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Real-time PCR standard curve using universal bacteria and archaea set.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parameter</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linear range (copy μL$^{-1}$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$ of slope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intersect</td>
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<tr>
<td>Source strains</td>
</tr>
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the vials. Hence, active methanogens cannot produce methane in the absence of a carbon source (Fig. 2a). Thus, CO₂ is the main source of carbon in influencing methane production in this study.

3.3. Confirmation of CH₄ from CO₂

In order to confirm that the enriched methanogens use H₂ and CO₂ supplemented to the vials to produce methane, the head space of some of the control vials that were initially sparged with N₂ was replaced by a mixture of H₂ and CO₂ after 10 days of incubation (Fig. 2a). The methane yield increased simultaneously after adding H₂ and CO₂, while no methane was detected with N₂ sparging during this timeframe. Methane production increased to 67 μmol mg⁻¹ TS after 7 days of sparging with the mixture with H₂ and CO₂. After 9 days of sparging with the mixture of H₂ and CO₂, the headspace of the control vials was then replaced with N₂. Without CO₂ in the vials, no methane was produced when the headspace of the vials was replaced with N₂ (Fig. 2a). Therefore, these results demonstrate that the methanogens require additional carbon and hydrogen sources for methane production [16].

Another set of experiments was carried out to prove that the methane production was from the supplemented CO₂. The enriched methanogens and autoclaved enriched methanogens (control) in different vials were sparged with a mixture of H₂ and ¹³CO₂ and analyzed for the production of ¹³CH₄ from ¹³CO₂. Fig. 3 shows that the percentage of ¹³C/¹²C of the headspace of methane obtained from the enriched methanogens vials was 77 (atom%) ¹³C/¹²C. Hence, the ¹³CH₄ that was produced by the methanogens was from the microbial conversion of ¹³CO₂.

3.4. Soluble metabolites and pH

Fig. 4 shows the organic acids and pH profile for 0 (Fig. 4a), 11 (Fig. 4b) and 25 days (Fig. 4c) of methane production after sparging with different gases. No changes in acetate concentrations were found in the vials sparged with both H₂ and CO₂ which shows that the methane production was from the H₂ and CO₂ in the headspace (Fig. 2b). Also, the slight formate consumption did not contribute much to the evolved methane in the vials sparged with the mixture of H₂ and CO₂. Furthermore, the vials sparged with only N₂ and H₂ showed no increment of acetate and no significant reduction of formate which is in agreement with the lack of methane evolution.

The vials sparged with CO₂ produced more acetate from 6.1 ± 0.4 mM to 15 ± 2 mM over the 11 days of incubation (Fig. 4b). Fig. 2a shows that the vials sparged with CO₂ started to produce methane after 18 day of anaerobic incubation. The result indicates that the vials sparged with CO₂ that tended to produce acetate after 11 days due to the reducing power left in the sludge. Acetate production in the enriched methanogens sparged by CO₂ might be due to Wood/Ljungdhal pathway (also known as CO dehydrogenase/acyt-CoA synthase pathway) directed by acetogens and several anaerobic microbes that are very diverse in sludge and employ the complex degradation pathway [42,43]. Then, the acetate was used by the acetoclastic methanogens for methane production [33]. Methane production starting from day 18 until day 25 of incubation in the vials sparged with CO₂ (Fig. 2a) was responsible for reducing the acetate concentration from day 11 to day 25 of the incubation (Fig. 4b and c).

Sparging of either only CO₂ or the mixture of H₂ and CO₂ gas both resulted in reduced pH and higher isobutyrate formation as indicated in Fig. 4a. The supplementation of the mixture of H₂ and CO₂ in the vials resulted in a pH decrease to 7.9 (Fig. 4a). However, the pH was increased to 8.8 during 25 days of incubation due to the complete CO₂ utilization in the vials prior to that time (Fig. 2b); the CO₂ sparging influenced the low pH conditions due to the carbonic acid formation as reported by Peterson and Daugulis [44]. Similarly, CO₂ is used in industry to neutralize pH in alkaline wastewater [45]. Furthermore, CO₂ dissolving in water produces hydrogen ions through the reaction: CO₂(g) + H₂O(aq) → H₂CO₃(aq) → H⁺ + HCO₃⁻(aq) → 2H⁺ + CO₃²⁻(aq) [46]. Hence, the hydrogen ions produced can be the electron donor for methane evolution in the vials supplemented with only CO₂ gas (Fig. 2a).
Fig. 4c shows that CO₂ supplementation resulted in significant acetate and isobutyrate formation in which both metabolites are utilized by aceticlastic methanogens such as *Methanosarcinaceae* [47,48]. This process resulted in CH₄ evolution in the vials sparged only with CO₂ (Fig. 2a). The addition of CO₂ to the vials favors the growth of acidogenic microorganisms since they can grow at low pH (5.2–6.5) for acetate and isobutyrate formation [49].

The *Methanosarcinaceae* which comprise of 30% out of the total archaea population in the inoculum enriched methanogens (Fig. 6), probably utilized acetate in the CO₂ vials for methane production [27]. The exergonic reaction CH₂COO⁻ + H₂O → CH₄ + HCO₃⁻ (∆G° = −31 kJ/mol) indicates the aceticlastic methanogens can produce CH₄ from acetate [42].

### 3.5. Microbial community analysis

Different sets of universal primers and probes targeting bacteria and Archaea were used in order to evaluate active bacteria and archaeal species in the raw sludge and in the inoculum with the enriched methanogens as indicated in Table 2. Fig. 5 shows the quantitative changes of the bacterial and archaeal population in the raw sludge and in the inoculum enriched in methanogens. A significant difference was found for the bacterial and archaeal populations between raw sludge and inoculum enriched methanogens. The bacterial population dominated the Archaea in raw sludge (4.02 × 10⁹ rRNA gene copies ml⁻¹ vs. 6.28 × 10⁸ rRNA gene copies ml⁻¹). In contrast, the archaeal population was drastically increased in the inoculum enriched in methanogens to 6.44 × 10¹³ rRNA gene copies ml⁻¹ while the bacterial population dropped to 1.08 × 10⁹ rRNA gene copies ml⁻¹. The increase in the archaeal population after enrichment shows that the culture was dominated with methanogens which were ready to use the supplemented gases as a substrate for CH₄ production. Thus, CH₄ evolution from the supplemented CO₂ was from the assimilation of CO₂ by the enrichment of WAS under anaerobic conditions.

In order to determine more details about the composition of the microbial community in the enriched inoculum, a microbial community analysis was performed by Illumina high-throughput 16S rRNA sequencing. The raw sludge was compared to the enriched methanogen inoculum after 1 day of sparging with N₂, H₂ and the mixture of H₂ and CO₂. Overall, a total of 221,349 high-quality reads were obtained with an average of 74,000 ± 23,000 reads per sample. Fig. 6 shows the relative abundance of the archaeal taxa from the high-throughput sequencing. The results demonstrate that the raw sludge is comprised of different types of archaeal phylotypes. However, after 1 day of sparging with N₂, H₂ and the mixture of H₂ and CO₂, the archaeal population was dominated by members of the *Methanobacteriaceae*, *Methanospirillaceae* and *Methanosarcinaceae* family. The *Methanosarcinaceae* family increased after 1 day of sparging in the vials sparged with N₂ (31%), H₂ (54%) and the mixture of H₂ and CO₂ (36%) when compared to the raw sludge (13%). The increment of *Methanobacteriaceae* out of the total archaeal population increased from 9.3% in raw sludge to 22.4%, 43.3% and 32.5% in the H₂, N₂ and the vial with the mixture of H₂ and CO₂, respectively. *Methanospirillaceae* was also abundant in all vials (especially in the vial sparged with H₂ and CO₂) which indicates that hydrogenotrophic methanogens were actively growing in the H₂ and CO₂ environment; i.e., methanogens that grow on H₂/CO₂ and formate [27,50]. The other microbial taxa in the raw sludge and sludge after 1 day of sparging with different gases were also represented by members of other hydrogenotrophic methanogens such as *Methanobacteriaceae*, *Methanospirillaceae*, *Methanoregulaceae*, *Methanocorpusculaceae* and *Methanobacteriales*. Other hydrogenotrophic methanogens such as *Methanoregulaceae*, *Methanocorpusculaceae* and *Methanobacteriales* were presented in the raw sludge but their population decreased after sparging with N₂, H₂ and the mixture of H₂ and CO₂. In the overall microbial community analysis from Fig. 6, the raw sludge contained a mixture of different archaeal phylotypes but the community shifted to a dominant archaeal family comprised of *Methanobacteriaceae*, *Methanospirillaceae* and *Methanosarcinaceae* in the vials after 1 day of sparging with N₂, H₂ and the mixture of H₂ and CO₂. The hydrogenotrophic methanogens in all samples was about 64–87% which indicates the dominant role of methanogens that grew in the H₂/CO₂ environment.

The likely reaction of the hydrogenotrophic methanogens is 4H₂ + CO₂ → CH₄ + 2H₂O (∆G° = −130.7 kJ/reaction) due to the higher CO₂ pressure with intermittent spiking of H₂ for methane production.

In this study, we demonstrated that active archaea accumulate in the inoculum by using a qRT-PCR analysis. Furthermore, complete CO₂ utilization shows that hydrogenotrophic methanogens grew actively in H₂/CO₂ environment to produce methane. Thus, this study introduces a promising strategy to sequester CO₂ from the environment. In a similar manner, CO₂ and CH₄ may also be utilized for other hydrocarbon fuels and chemicals production.

### 3.6. Economic value and potential

Due to increasing interest in CO₂ sequestration, many attempts have been made to utilize CO₂ for methane or electricity production. CO₂ sequestration for energy production has a positive impact on the environment and has favorable economics. Table 4 shows the overall process (inputs and outputs) for methane production in this study using sludge enriched in methanogens and after sparging with different gases (CO₂ sequestration). Initial methane gas generated during the enrichment process for the methanogens was 0.3 L CH₄/L from sequential sparging with N₂ or H₂. During this process, N₂ gas sparged for the first 10 injection with 0.05–0.06 L N₂ per each injection, cost about $0.06/L [51] followed by three H₂ injections that cost about $ 3–6/L [52] (Fig. 1). The sparging of both N₂ and H₂ generated methane worth $ 4.16–17.13/L by different categories of the US EIA data in 2014 [53]. Although H₂ might be an issue for methane production, it can be produced by eco-friendly and renewable way such as by wind turbines, solar panels, water electrolysis, and photovoltaic cells [54].

In contrast, after sparging with different gases to investigate CO₂ sequestration, 0.5 g/L of WAS generates 0.3 L CH₄/L of enriched methanogens in 10 days of incubation after sparging with the mixture of H₂ and CO₂. Meanwhile, sparging with only CO₂ generated 0.05 L CH₄/L of enriched methanogens in 25 days of incubation. Throughout the process, 1 mol of CO₂ generated 1 mol of CH₄ in the headspace of the vials. With a proper handling and control, the enriched methanogens after CO₂ sequestration can be used in...
a repeated batch operation or in a continuous system for methane production due to the consistent ability of the enriched methanogens to utilize CO$_2$ as well as to produce methane. Thus, no waste from the WAS is generated from this system. Also, fermentable components in the WAS were reduced during preparation of the enriched methanogen inoculum. Hence, the overall process yields a significant credit in terms of reducing WAS volume, as well as of course credits in terms of CO$_2$ sequestration and energy production.

To understand the economic value and potential of this proposed system, a comparison of this process with other processes for utilization of CO$_2$ for energy production was made and the results are shown in Table 5. The comparison shows the advantages and disadvantages of each technology. An advantage of the biological approach is that a thermal and electrical energy input are not required. However, other techniques such as enhanced coal-bed methane production with CO$_2$ injection (CO$_2$-ECBM) and integrated gasification combined cycle (IGCC) require high energy inputs. Bajón Fernández et al. [55] reported improved methane production in a digester containing food waste and sewage sludge supplied with saturated CO$_2$. However Bajón Fernández et al. [55] did not show significant evidence for methane production was come from CO$_2$ sequestration.

On the other hand, the catalytic synthesis of H$_2$ and CO$_2$ to produce energy was also studied and applied for business application. For example, an automobiles company, Audi, has opened a pilot plant which converts an atmospheric CO$_2$, water and electricity into hydrocarbon fuel [56]. The method for energy conversion was in accordance to the method described by Zuberbuhler et al. [57] with two stages reaction. The first stage is the electrolysis of water to produce H$_2$, followed by catalytic reaction of H$_2$ and CO$_2$. Both chemical reactions require high temperature and pressure. In addition, other studies also reported the catalytic process of H$_2$O–CO$_2$ co-electrolysis in solid oxide electrolysis cells for con-

![Fig. 6. Relative abundance of the dominant archaeal taxa in the raw sludge and in the inoculum of enriched methanogens after sparging with N$_2$, H$_2$ and the mixture of H$_2$ and CO$_2$. Results derived from high-throughput 16S rRNA sequencing. Minor phyla accounting for <0.5% of the total sequences are summarized in group marked ‘other’.](image)

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enriched methanogen preparation</th>
<th>CO$_2$ sequestration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Input</strong></td>
<td><strong>Output</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WAS 50 g/L (no cost)</td>
<td>Enriched methanogens as catalyst for CO$_2$ sequestration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N$_2$ ~0.05–0.06 L per injection (cost: $0.06/L) [51]</td>
<td>Methane gas (0.3 L/L enriched methanogens) (CH$_4$ price: $4.16–17.13$/L)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H$_2$ ~0.05–0.06 L per injection (cost: $3–6$/L) [52]</td>
<td>Methane gas (0.3 L/L enriched methanogens)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H$_2$:CO$_2$ (4:1) – –</td>
<td>– –</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO$_2$ – –</td>
<td>– –</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Input</strong></th>
<th><strong>Output</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enriched methanogens as catalyst for CO$_2$ sequestration</td>
<td>na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methane gas (0.3 L/L enriched methanogens) (CH$_4$ price: $4.16–17.13$/L)</td>
<td>Organic acids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methane gas (0.3 L/L enriched methanogens) and organic acids</td>
<td>Organic acids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methane gas (0.05 L/L enriched methanogens) and organic acids (mainly isobutyric)</td>
<td>– –</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

na: not available.

Table 4 Summary of methane production in the enriched methanogen preparation and after different gases was injected into the enriched methanogens (CO$_2$ sequestration).
Economic comparison between processes for sequestering CO2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treatment</th>
<th>Biological</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thermal or electrical energy input</td>
<td>No thermal or electrical energy were used</td>
<td>Energy used for pressurizing CO2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CH4/electrical energy production</td>
<td>227 mL CH4/g VS in vials sparge with H2 + CO2</td>
<td>30 MMCF/month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fuel consumption</td>
<td>195 mL CH4/g VS (in food waste + CO2)</td>
<td>Thermal energy used for the 360 °C heat exchanger and for the 1300 °C turbine inlet temperature Electric energy: 3647 GW h/year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By-products</td>
<td>H2 (in vials sparge with H2 and CO2)</td>
<td>Coal required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO2 reduction efficiency</td>
<td>Organic acids (isobutyric acid in vials sparged with CO2)</td>
<td>na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time consumption for biogas/electric production</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>Monthly injected CO2 depended on market demand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>This study</td>
<td>Epizytophic community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[55]</td>
<td>85~97%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

na: not available.

version of carbon to methane (C (s) + 2H2 → CH4) which also requires a high energy input (550–750 °C) [58]. However, Jacquesmin and colleague [54] reported the catalytic synthesis of methane from H2 and CO2 at low temperature and atmospheric pressure. The process requires three steps, (1) chemisorption of CO2 on the catalyst, (2) CO2 dissociation, and (3) H2 reaction with dissociated product. Compared to our study, our approach used microbial sources from WAS as a catalyst for CO2 sequestration to produce methane. High temperature and pressure, as well as electricity are not required in our reaction system. Our system requires good enriched methanogens for CO2 sequestration, with two stages of methane production, (1) methane produced naturally by anaerobic degradation of WAS (Fig. 1), and (2) methane production by CO2 sequestration (Fig. 2). In addition, our proposed method could be applied in industry after complete anaerobic degradation of organic materials. For example, after a complete anaerobic utilization of organic waste for methane production, CO2 can be introduced in the microbial community containing enriched methanogens that remain in the sample for methane production. Thus, the microbial community in the sample can be used to generate methane energy from CO2.

This study shows the potential of generating methane (227 mL CH4/g VS in vials sparged with a mixture of H2 and CO2, and 128 mL CH4/g VS in vials sparged with CO2), when compared to other biomass feedstocks such as food waste supplemented with CO2 (195 mL CH4/g VS) [55]. Even though biological methods do not require much capital due to the use of microorganisms to sequester CO2, this method requires a long incubation period for methane production (from 3 to 25 days) as indicated in Table 5.

The economic value and potential from Table 5 shows that this study can be seen as one of the methods for CO2 reduction with 77% 13CH4 conversion from 13CO2. This study can be applicable in industry due to its ability to sequester CO2 for methane production without the requirement of high cost technology and high energy input. Therefore, methane energy produced by microorganisms has great economic potential with a significant contribution to sustained environment via CO2 sequestration.

4. Conclusions

Biological methane production from CO2 sequestration by enriched methanogens from waste activated sludge (WAS) was demonstrated in this study. This approach appears to be reasonable to mitigate global warming. The WAS that was dominated by an active bacterial community was changed to an active archaeal community after the enrichment for methanogens as demonstrated by quantitative real time PCR (qRT-PCR). The diverse community of Archaea in the raw WAS then dominated by hydrogenotrophic and acetoclastic methanogens such as members of the Methanobacteriaceae, Methanospirillaceae and Methanosarcinaceae family in the enriched methanogen culture as demonstrated by high-throughput sequencing. Methane was not produced without CO2 supplementation to the enriched methanogens due to the lack of available carbon for the archaeal community, and the carbon in the methane was shown to come from utilization of the CO2 based on the use of 13CO2. Therefore, application of this research can contribute to improving the environment by reducing the greenhouse gas CO2.

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