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Rapid VOC sensors based on electrolytically exfoliated graphene-loaded flame-made La-doped SnO₂ composite films

In this work, flame-made SnO₂ nanoparticles were systematically studied by doping with 0.1–2 wt % lanthanum (La) and loading with 0.1–10 wt% electrolytically exfoliated graphene for low detection of VOCs gases including acetone (C₃H₆O) and ethanol (C₂H₅OH) gases occurred in human breathe. The sensing films were prepared by a spin-coating technique on Au/Al₂O₃ substrates and evaluated to 6–400 ppm acetone and 3–200 ppm ethanol at working temperatures ranging from 150 to 350°C in dry air. Structural characterizations by electron microscopy, X-ray analysis and raman spectrometry further demonstrated that La doped SnO₂ nanostructures had a spheroidal morphology with a polycrystalline tetragonal SnO₂ phase, and La was confirmed to form a solid solution with SnO₂ lattice while graphene in the sensing film after annealing and testing still retained its high-quality nonoxidized form. Gas-sensing results evidently showed that SnO₂ sensing film with optimal 0.5 wt% La-doping concentration exhibited high response of ~1200 toward 400 ppm acetone and ~700 toward 200 ppm ethanol with ultra-high detection speed with very short response time within a few seconds at 350°C. The additional loading of graphene at 0.1 wt % into 0.5 wt% La-doped SnO₂ led to a drastic response enhancement to ~4100 toward 400 ppm acetone at 350°C and ~1700 toward 200 ppm ethanol at 300°C with shorted response time. The superior gas sensing performances of La-doped SnO₂ nanoparticles loaded with graphene may be attributed to the large specific surface area of the composite structure, specifically the high interaction rate between acetone and/or ethanol vapor and graphene–La-doped SnO₂ nanoparticles interfaces and high electronic conductivity of graphene. Therefore, the 0.1 wt% graphene loaded 0.5 wt % La-doped SnO₂ sensor is a promising candidate for fast, sensitive and selective detection of VOCs. Furthermore, the sensors displayed very high VOCs selectivity against SO₂, H₂S, NH₃, C₂H₄, C₂H₄O, CH₄ and H₂. Therefore, the graphene loaded La-doped SnO₂ sensor are potential for responsive and selective detections of VOCs at a threshold limit value (TLV) of permissible legal limit of acetone and ethanol concentration in human's breath which may be essential for drunken driving detection and biomedical applications.

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