



Visual colorimetric ‘turn-off’ biosensor for ascorbic acid detection based on hypochlorite–3,3′,5,5′,-Tetramethylbenzidine system

Chunlei Mu^{a,1}, Haifeng Lu^{a,*,1}, Jie Bao^b, Qunlin Zhang^c

^a Anhui No. 2 Province People's Hospital, Hefei 200041, PR China

^b Department of Pharmacy, Hospital of Armed Police of Anhui Province, Hefei 230061, PR China

^c School of Pharmacy, Anhui Medical University, Hefei 230032, PR China

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ABSTRACT

An ‘turn-off’ approach for the detection of ascorbic acid (AA) using 3,3′,5,5′,-tetramethylbenzidine (TMB) as a colorimetric probe is developed. The proposed method is based on the fact that hypochlorite (ClO^-) could oxidize TMB to oxidized TMB (oxTMB) along with a blue color and an absorption peak centered at 652 nm. However, the introduction of AA could cause the reduction of oxTMB, which results in a blue color fading and a decrease of the absorbance at 652 nm. Based on this finding, we proposed a sensitive colorimetric assay for quantitative determination of AA by UV–vis spectroscopy. Under the optimal conditions, a good linear response between the absorbance and AA concentration was achieved within the dynamic working range from 1 to 70 μM with a detection limit of 0.58 μM . More importantly, the proposed method offered advantages of simple, low-cost instruments and rapid assay without the utilization of nanomaterials and has also been successfully applied for the determination of AA in orange juice with satisfying recoveries over 97.0%. Furthermore, the obtained results were consistent with those measured by high performance liquid chromatography with the average relative error of 3.3%.

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1. Introduction

Ascorbic acid (AA), an effective antioxidant, exists widely in human physiological environment [1]. It plays a key role in many biological processes in the human body such as a cofactor in enzymatic reactions, collagen synthesis, scurvy prevention, and immune system enhancement [2,3]. It is well known that amount of AA in physiological inner is associated with numerous clinical diseases such as scurvy, Parkinson's disease, urinary stone, diarrhea, stomach, as well as numerous types of cancers [4,5]. Additionally, because primates as human cannot obtain this species through their own biosynthesis, AA should be taken from external sources as a necessary nutrient [6]. This species exists in a variety of foods and drinks, and it is frequently detected for the evaluation of these sources. Hence, the sensitive determination of AA in foodstuffs and food preservatives is essential for the human health, food assurance, and quality control.

Up to date, numerous AA sensors have been developed and mainly rely on the following two strategies. One was electrochemical strategy, in which the presence of AA could generate a significant oxidation signal at electrode and thus lead to a typical amperometric behavior [7–10].

Unfortunately, electrodes used in electrochemical sensor inevitably suffered from a pronounced fouling affect due to the accumulation of oxidized products on electrode surface. Moreover, electrochemical oxidation peak potentials for dopamine and uric acid are similar to that for AA, which will seriously interfere in the determination of AA. The other was optical strategy, in which fluorescent sensors [11–15] and colorimetric sensors [16–20] were designed with specific and high response toward AA. Optical sensing using fluorescence is becoming increasingly important for quantitative analytical techniques because of its high sensitivity and low limit of detection. Various fluorescent probes including carbon dots (CDs) [11], gold nanoclusters (Au NCs) [12], copper nanoclusters [21], graphene quantum dots (GQDs) [13,22], graphitic carbon nitride ($\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$) nanosheets [23], MoS_2 quantum dots (MoS_2 QDs) [24] and CdTe quantum dots [25] have been developed, which provide an effective fluorescent sensing platform for the detection of AA. Meanwhile, colorimetric sensors have also aroused great interest due to the advantages of low background signal, direct measurement and no need of any advanced instrumentation, facilitating the detection of analytes by naked eyes and UV–vis spectrometer. For instance, Zhang et al. reported a label-free strategy for ascorbic acid (AA) sensing based on Fenton reaction with unmodified gold nanoparticles (AuNPs) as probe [16]. Wang et al. utilized Gold/Silver Core/Shell nanorod as a highly efficient signal amplification method for the detection of AA [18]. Peng et al. established a

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: lhshengeryuan@163.com (H. Lu).

¹ Chunlei Mu and Haifeng Lu contributed equally to this work.

colorimetric method for determination of AA based on growth of silver nanoparticles by a simple and green photo-catalytic route [20]. Despite the importance of above optical sensors, their use still shows drawbacks. General speaking, these sensors suffered from the disadvantages of high cost, time-consuming and complex preparation or modification of nanomaterials. Furthermore, poor biocompatibility and instability of the probes also limited their practical applications. Consequently, developing a new colorimetric sensing platform with simplicity, sensitivity and efficiency for the detection of AA was still highly desired.

TMB (3,3',5,5'-tetramethylbenzidine), a widely used chromogenic substrate, is utilized as a visualizing reagent in biosensing assays because it yields reaction products with high absorption coefficients and lacks carcinogenicity [26]. And the reaction of the oxidation of TMB by hydrogen peroxide (H_2O_2), as well as the catalyst of the reaction has been drawn a lot of attention. More recently, it has found that various nanomaterials (e.g., CuO/Pt nanocomposites [27], metal-organic frameworks material MIL-88 [28], Co_3O_4 /CGM nanohybrid [29], Cu-Ag/rGO nanocomposite [30], PSS-rGO [31] and CuNPs@C nanocomposite [32]) exhibited a highly efficient peroxidase-like activity and has been successfully applied to the detection of AA. Compared to the above catalyst, the hypochlorite (ClO^-)-based colorimetric determination not only holds properties of fast response and high sensitivity, but also shows advantages over the peroxidase activity-mediated assay, such as convenience, low cost, and direct oxidation without the use of H_2O_2 . But unfortunately, at present, its application field is still narrow, which only is confined to detect the concentration of ClO^- [33].

In this study, we report a facile and effective colorimetric 'turn-off' sensing platform for the quantitative detection of AA based on ClO^- -TMB system. Previous reports have shown that ClO^- can oxidize TMB to induce a blue color and an absorption peak centered at 652 nm [33]. AA are well-known reducing agents due to the existence of phenol hydroxyl group which can induce the reduction of oxidized TMB (oxTMB) and result in the fading of the blue color and the decrease of the absorbance at 652 nm. Based on the above facts, a rapid and sensitive method for AA detection was established and successfully applied to detect AA in orange juice samples. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first method in which ClO^- -TMB system has been used for the detection of AA.

2. Experimental

2.1. Reagent and Chemicals

All chemicals used were at least of analytical reagent grade and used without further purification. TMB was purchased from Biosharp (Hefei, China). Ascorbic acid (AA), glucose (Glu), fructose (Fru), mannose (Man) and citric acid (CA) acquired from Sigma-Aldrich. Sodium hypochlorite (NaClO), sodium chloride (NaCl), potassium chloride (KCl), magnesium sulphate (MgSO_4), calcium chloride (CaCl_2), sodium acetate (NaAc) and acetic acid (HAc) were obtained from Sinopharm Chemical Reagent Co., Ltd. (Shanghai, China). Orange juice came from Minute Maid (www.coca-cola.com.cn). Ultrapure water (18.2 M cm^{-1}) prepared by a Millipore system (Millipore, USA) was used throughout the whole experiments.

2.2. Instruments

UV-vis spectra were recorded using an Agilent 8453 UV-vis spectrometer (Agilent, USA). A characteristic absorption peak of oxidized TMB at 652 nm was used for quantitative analysis. The high performance liquid chromatography (HPLC) system was the LC-20A series (Shimadzu, Japan), including a quaternary pump, a vacuum degasser, a thermostated column compartment, a prominence diode array detector (DAD), a manual sample valve injector with a 20 μL loop, and an analytical column (Shim-pack ODS, $250 \times 4.6 \text{ mm}$ - i.d. 5 μm ; Shimadzu,

Japan). The pH value of buffer was adjusted by titrating with HAc and controlled by a PHS-3C pH meter (Leici, Shanghai).

2.3. Procedures for AA Sensing

To a series 5 mL calibrated test tubes, 50 μL of 4 mM NaClO solutions and 50 μL of 4 mM TMB dissolved in absolute alcohol were diluted to 900 μL with HAc/NaAc buffer (50 mM, pH 3.5). Then, 100 μL of AA standard solutions with different concentrations were added to each of the mixture solutions, which were shaken and equilibrated at room temperature for 30 s. Finally, the mixed solution was transferred separately into 1 cm quartz cuvette and directly monitored by UV-vis spectrometer.

2.4. Selective Detection of AA

Several potential interfering solutions coexisting in commercial orange juice, including glucose, fructose, mannose, citric acid and 4 kinds of cations (Na^+ , K^+ , Mg^{2+} and Ca^{2+}) were prepared in a concentration of 2.5 mM, respectively. To evaluate the selectivity of the proposed method, two groups of experiments were performed. On the one hand, 50 μL of 4 mM TMB, 50 μL of 4 mM NaClO and each 100 μL of the above solutions were added sequentially in 800 μL of 50 mM HAc/NaAc buffer solutions. On the other hand, each 100 μL of the above solutions was pre-mixed with 100 μL of 0.5 mM of AA, which was then separately added to the ClO^- -TMB sensing system. Photographs and UV-vis spectroscopy were recorded after reaction for 30 s at room temperature.

2.5. Analysis of AA in Orange Juice

Commercial orange juices were bought from a local supermarket (Hefei, China). Firstly, orange juice samples were filtered with 0.22 μm Millipore filter to remove the insoluble components and then forty-fold diluted by ultrapure water. Following that, the diluted orange juice samples were added into the ClO^- -TMB sensing system as mentioned. Finally, content of AA in orange juice samples was calculated according to a linear equation obtained from a standard solution of AA.

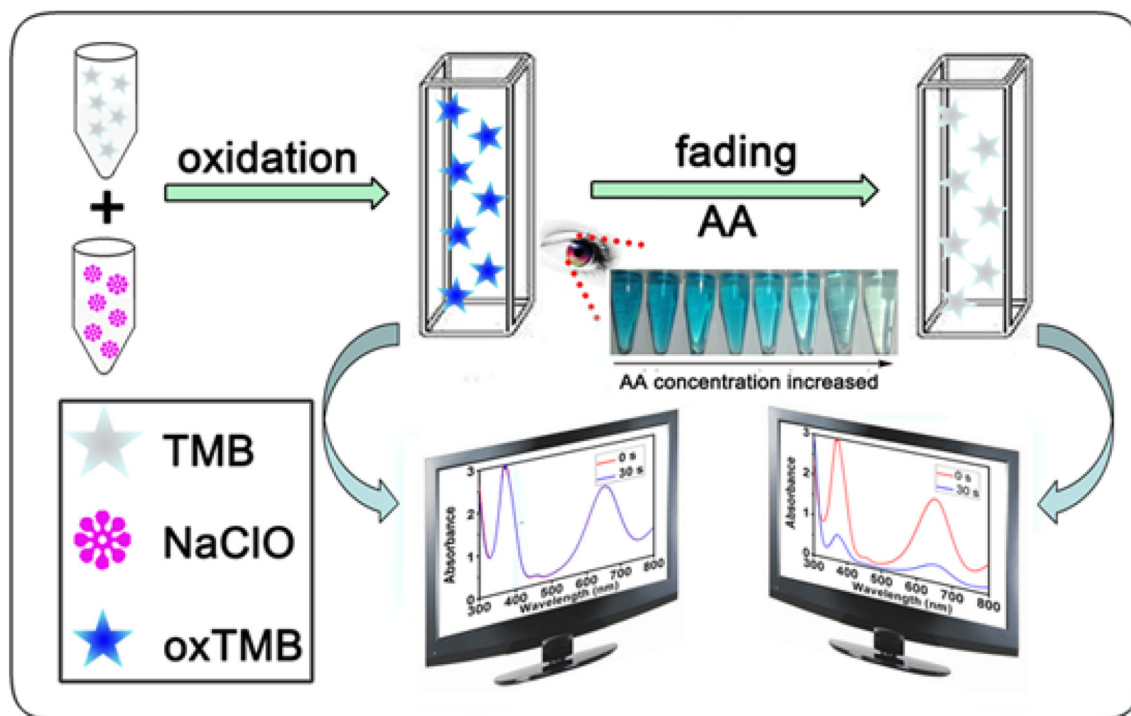
3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Design and Principle of the Sensing System

The working principle of the designed method for sensing the AA is schematically shown in Scheme 1. Previous report have shown that TMB as a colorimetric probe could be oxidized by ClO^- to form an oxidizing product (oxTMB), thereby inducing a blue color and a strong characteristic absorption peak centered at 652 nm. Subsequently, addition of AA into ClO^- -TMB aqueous solution could cause the reduction of oxTMB, which results in a blue color fading and a decrease of the absorbance (A detailed reaction process was provided in Fig. S1). The sensing system could be visualized by naked eyes or measured with UV-vis spectrophotometer. Thus, a new colorimetric sensor for the detection of AA was established by coupling two reactions, which can be expressed by the following equations:



In order to verify sensing mechanism, several control tests under different conditions were implemented by using visual color readout and UV-vis absorption. As indicated from Fig. 1, no characteristic absorption peak from 300 to 800 nm was observed at pure TMB solution. In contrast, two strong absorption peaks were simultaneously achieved after



Scheme 1. Schematic illustration of colorimetric platform for sensing AA.

interaction of TMB with ClO^- (curve b), which was ascribed to the oxidation of TMB by ClO^- . Meanwhile, the colorless TMB solution (photograph a, inset) exhibited an obvious blue color change in the presence of ClO^- (photograph b, inset). After that, the introduction of AA into the ClO^- -TMB system resulted in the fading of the blue color (photograph c, inset) and the decrease of the absorbance (curve c). The results confirmed that AA as an antioxidant could reduce the blue oxTMB to colorless TMB. Therefore, it is concluded that the ClO^- -TMB sensing system can be applied for the detection of AA.

3.2. Optimization of Detection Conditions

For the best performance of our proposed sensing system, the optimized conditions such as pH, reaction time, concentrations of ClO^-

and TMB were systematically investigated. ΔA was used as a criterion to optimize the detection conditions and defined as $A_0 - A$, where A_0 and A are the absorbance of sensing system in the absence and presence of 30 μM AA, respectively.

The pH value was crucial factor for the sensing system. Therefore, the effect of pH on the sensing system was investigated in the range of 2.5–6.5 and the results are described in Fig. 3a. It is clearly seen that too high or too low pH was not suitable for the reaction system. The highest ΔA was obtained when the pH was 3.5. Consequently, pH 3.5 was adopted in the following experiments. Different reaction times ranging from 0 s to 600 s were investigated to study its effect on the ΔA . It is noteworthy that the ΔA increases rapidly with the increase of the reaction time, and becomes almost constant when the incubation time is higher than 30 s (Fig. 2), which has been chosen as the optimal time for the following study. A study focusing on the effect of the

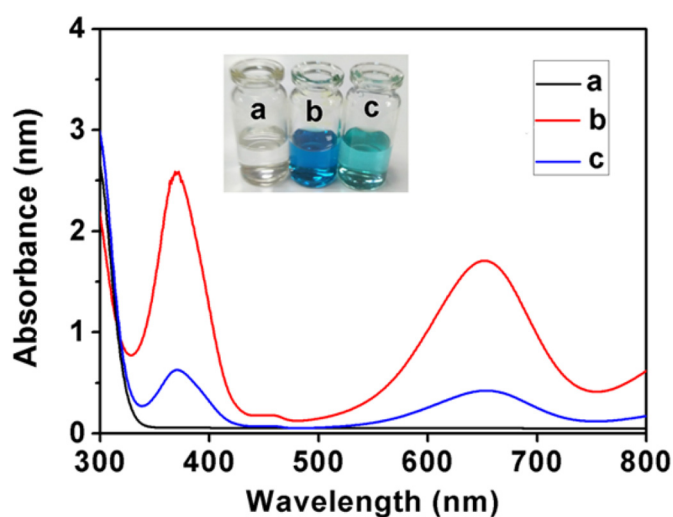


Fig. 1. UV-vis absorption spectra of TMB (curve a), TMB + NaClO (curve b); (c) TMB + NaClO + AA (curve c). The inset shows the corresponding digital images. Reaction conditions: NaClO, 0.2 mM; TMB, 0.2 mM; AA, 50 μM .

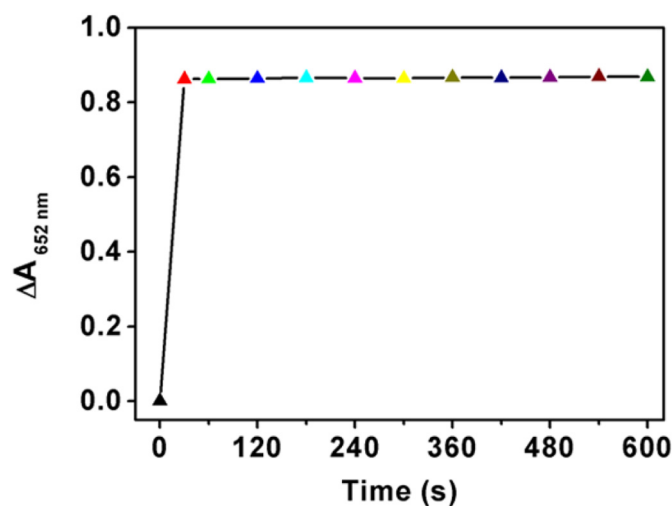


Fig. 2. Plots of $\Delta A_{652\text{nm}}$ signal versus the reaction time of ClO^- -TMB-AA sensing system. Reaction conditions: NaClO, 0.2 mM; TMB, 0.2 mM; AA, 30 μM .

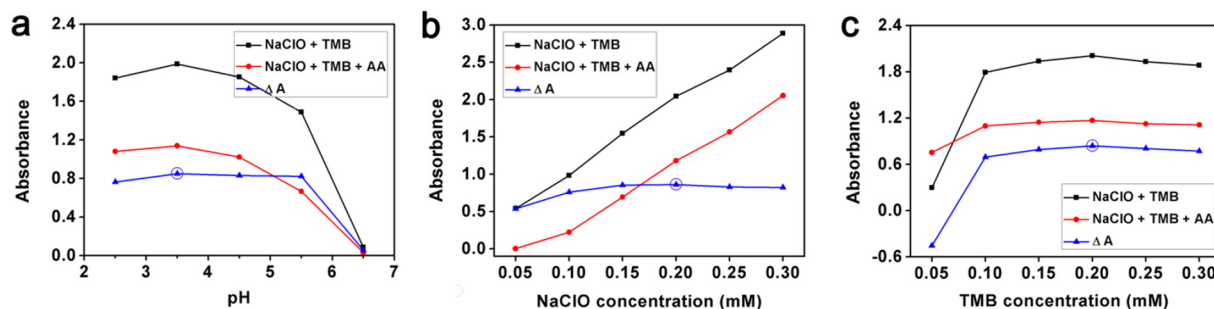


Fig. 3. Optimization of the reaction conditions for AA detection. Plots of $A_{652\text{nm}}$ signal in the absence and presence of AA and plots of $\Delta A_{652\text{nm}}$ signal versus the (a) NaClO concentrations (0.05–0.3 mM), (b) TMB concentrations (0.05–0.3 mM) and (c) pH (from 2.5 to 6.5). The concentrations of NaClO, TMB and AA were 0.2 mM, 0.2 mM and 30 μM , respectively.

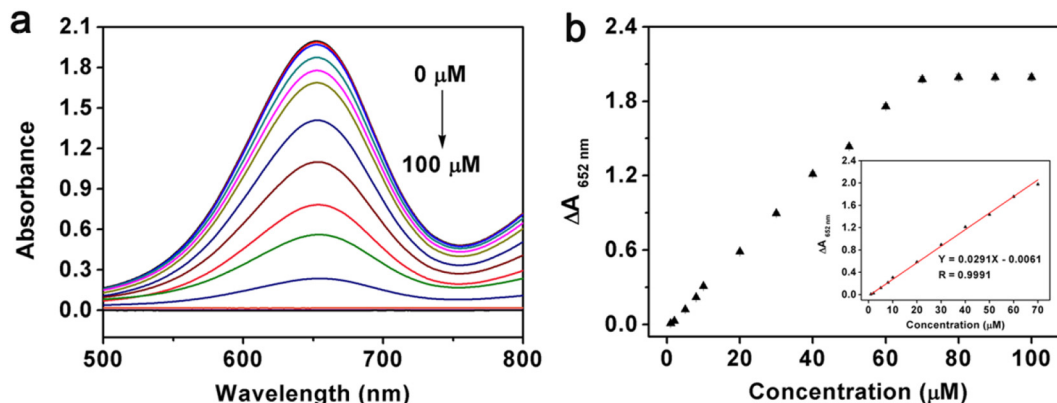


Fig. 4. (a) UV-vis absorption spectra of the ClO^- -TMB in aqueous solution (50 mM HAc/NaAc buffer, pH 3.5) upon addition of various concentrations of AA (from top to bottom: 0, 1, 2, 5, 8, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 90, 100 μM). (b) A dose-response curve between AA concentration and $\Delta A_{652\text{nm}}$ signal under optimum conditions. The inset shows a linear relationship in the concentration range from 1 to 70 μM . The error bars represent the standard deviations of three independent measurements.

concentration of NaClO and TMB on the ΔA was provided in Fig. 3b and c, respectively. The experiments show that the highest ΔA was obtained when both concentrations of NaClO and TMB were 0.2 mM. Therefore, 0.2 mM of NaClO and 0.2 mM of TMB were used for the colorimetric assay.

3.3. Linearity and Detection Limit

Under the optimal conditions, the sensitivity and dynamic measurement range of the colorimetric sensor were evaluated with AA standard solutions by using oxidized TMB as colorimetric indicator. As shown in Fig. 4a, upon the addition of increasing concentrations of AA, the absorbance at 652 nm gradually decreased, which was attributed to the reduction of oxidized TMB by AA. Therefore, the absorption intensity change of the oxTMB was employed in the quantitative analysis of AA. Fig. 4b shows a typical AA concentration-response curve, suggesting

that the ΔA signal increased gradually upon the increasing concentration of AA, and the curve deviated from straight line was observed when the concentration of AA was up to 70 μM . Subsequently, a satisfying linear relationship, $Y = 0.0291X - 0.0061$ (μM), was obtained over the range of 1–70 μM with the correlation coefficient of 0.9991 (inset of Fig. 4b). The results suggest that this probe can be used to detect AA with a detection limit of 0.58 μM calculated by a signal-to-noise ratio of 3 ($3\sigma/S$). Here, S means the slope of the linear equation and σ means the standard deviation of blank measurements. The detection limit $DL = 3(0.0056/0.0291) = 0.58 \mu\text{M}$. A comparison of characteristics between the proposed method and other AA sensors reported elsewhere was summarized in Table 1 [16,22,29,30,34–37]. The detection limit and linear range of AA in this work were comparable or even better than those of reported sensors. More importantly, the assay can be completed within 30 s, which is much shorter than many previous reports. The repeatability of the proposed method is evaluated by five repeated

Table 1
Comparison of different sensors for AA detection.

System	Signal output	Time of analysis	Linear range (μM)	LOD (μM)	References
$\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4/\text{CGM}/\text{TMB}/\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$	Colorimetry	10 min	30–140	0.19	[29]
$\text{Fe}^{2+}/\text{H}_2\text{O}_2/\text{ssDNA}^a/\text{Au}$	Colorimetry	30 min	1–15	0.3	[16]
$\text{Cu-Ag}/\text{rGO}/\text{TMB}/\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$	Colorimetry	50 min	5–30	3.6	[30]
$\text{AgNPs}/\text{rGO}^b/\text{GCE}$	Amperometry	No report	10–800	9.6	[34]
$\text{MWCNT}/\text{PNB-3}^c/\text{GCE}$	Amperometry	No report	10–140	2.4	[35]
$\text{GSH-AuNCs}/\text{H}_2\text{O}_2/\text{Fe}^{2+}$	Fluorescence	5 min	5–100	5	[36]
$\text{GQDs}/\text{H}_2\text{O}_2/\text{HRP}/\text{catechol}$	Fluorescence	40 min	1.11–300	0.32	[22]
$\text{Fe}^{2+}/\text{CdTe QD@SiO}_2$ nanobeads	Fluorescence	50 min	3.33–400	1.25	[37]
ClO^-/TMB	Colorimetry	30 s	1–70	0.58	This work

^a Single stranded DNA.

^b Silver nanoparticle-decorated reduced graphene oxide composite.

^c Multiwalled carbon nanotubes (MWCNT) and poly (Nile blue A).

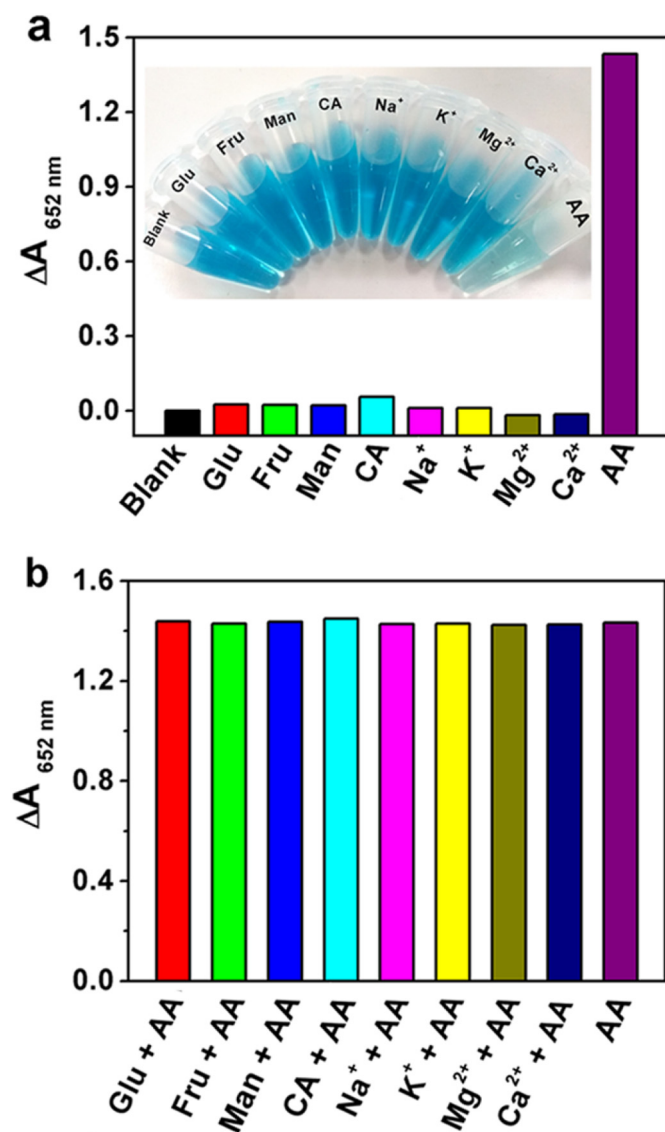


Fig. 5. Selectivity of the colorimetric sensor for the detection of AA. (a) The $\Delta A_{652\text{nm}}$ values of ClO[−]–TMB sensing system in the presence of 0.25 mM potential interferences; (b) The $\Delta A_{652\text{nm}}$ values of ClO[−]–TMB sensing system in the presence of 0.05 mM AA and 0.25 mM potential interferences. Various substances (from left to right) are glucose (Glu), fructose (Fru), mannose (Man), citric acid (CA), Na⁺, K⁺, Mg²⁺, Ca²⁺ and AA. All reaction systems contain 0.2 mM NaClO and 0.2 mM TMB at pH 3.5, and the $A_{652\text{nm}}$ signals were collected at 30 s after initiation.

measurements of 30 μM of AA (Fig. S2), and the relative standard deviation (RSD) was calculated to be 1.1%, demonstrating the reliability of the proposed method.

3.4. Selectivity

To evaluate the selectivity of this protocol for AA, possible coexisting substances in orange juice including glucose, fructose, mannose, citric

acid and 4 kinds of cations (Na⁺, K⁺, Mg²⁺ and Ca²⁺) were examined under the optimized conditions. The ΔA signal and corresponding photographic images of the ClO[−]–TMB system containing 0.05 mM AA and 5-fold other substances, respectively, are vividly shown in Fig. 5a. Except for AA other potential interferences have no evident effect on the $\Delta A_{652\text{nm}}$ signal and the color of the sensing system, demonstrating the developed sensor has a superior selectivity for colorimetric detection of AA. To verify the performance of the sensing system for AA in practical applications, colorimetric detection in the presence of AA along with other possible interferences is investigated (Fig. 5b). The relative error of the interference effect of common cations and biomolecules on detecting AA was less than 2.0%, which was considered to be tolerable. Therefore, it is concluded that the sensor responded specifically toward AA without interference of other substances, and the sensing platform is appropriate for the selective detection of AA in orange juice samples after dilution.

3.5. Real Sample Assay

To investigate the feasibility of developed AA sensor for practical application, the accuracy of proposed sensor was performed by adding different concentrations (0, 20 and 40 μM) of AA standard solutions. As listed in Table 2, the recoveries of known amount of AA in the 400-fold diluted real samples were between 97.9% and 102.7% with the RSD ranging from 1.7% to 2.2%, indicating that the proposed sensor was applicable for the quantification of AA in orange juice samples. To verify the accuracy of the results obtained by the proposed method, a traditional HPLC analysis assay was used to determine the concentration of AA as a control. The results of the two methods for AA detection in orange juice samples are listed in Table 3 for comparison. The measured values of five real samples obtained by the proposed method were 3.284, 2.944, 3.176, 3.380 and 3.248 mM, respectively, which were well in agreement with that obtained by HPLC (3.125, 2.987, 3.259, 3.234 and 3.351 mM). The average relative error between two methods used was 3.3%. These results reveal that the proposed sensor was of high accurate and could be applied for rapid detection of AA in real samples in a simple way.

4. Conclusions

In summary, we constructed a rapid and visual 'turn-off' sensor for the quantitative detection of AA based on the ClO[−]–TMB system. In the absence of AA, ClO[−] could oxidize TMB to the oxidized TMB and produce a blue color, while the introduction of AA induce the decrease of absorbance and the color become lighter gradually with the increase addition of AA. Compared with other existing methods, the ClO[−]–TMB sensing system possesses several distinct advantages: (1) the developed assay does not require any complex synthesis or modification of nanomaterials. (2) The signal output could be semi-quantitatively observed by naked eyes and quantitatively monitored by UV–vis spectroscopy, respectively. (3) The reaction is very fast and the whole assay can be accomplished in 30 s. Under the optimum conditions, the assay offers a good linear relationship between the ΔA signal and AA concentration in the range of 1–70 μM , with a detection limit of 0.58 μM . More importantly, this method is successfully applied to the detection of AA in commercial orange juice with high simplicity, feasibility and reproducibility, illustrating its great potential in food industries.

Conflicts of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

Acknowledgments

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Table 2

Recoveries of the determination of AA in orange juice samples using the proposed sensor.

Sample	Added	Found (μM)	Recovery (%)	RSD (% , n = 3)
Orange juice 1	0	8.21 ± 0.14	–	1.7
	20.0	27.80 ± 0.64	97.9	2.0
	40.0	48.94 ± 1.02	101.8	1.9
Orange juice 2	0	7.36 ± 0.13	–	1.8
	20.0	27.33 ± 0.62	99.8	2.2
	40.0	48.45 ± 0.97	102.7	2.0

Table 3
Determination of AA in orange juice samples using the proposed sensor and HPLC.

Sample	AA concentration (mM)		Relative error (%)	Average relative error (%)
	HPLC	Proposed sensor		
Orange juice 1	3.125	3.284	4.8	3.3
Orange juice 2	2.987	2.944	1.7	
Orange juice 3	3.259	3.176	2.6	
Orange juice 4	3.234	3.380	4.3	
Orange juice 5	3.351	3.248	3.1	

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.saa.2018.04.059>.

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