Photoinduced reversible transmittance modulation of rod–coil type diblock copolymers containing azobenzene in the main chain‡

Jaewon Heo, Yun Jun Kim, Myungeun Seo, Seonhee Shin and Sang Youl Kim*

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Photoinduced reversible transmittance modulation was achieved with the self-assembled block copolymer micelles. A large conformational change of the well-defined rod–coil diblock copolymers containing azobenzene and ether groups in the main chain of the rod block induced a remarkable macroscopic change which can be observed with the naked eye.

Nanostructured materials responsive to external stimuli such as temperature, pH, chemicals, and light have attracted considerable research interest due to their potential application in many areas including integrated optical devices and biomedical drug delivery. Among many stimuli, light has distinctive advantages such as controllable selectivity of illumination areas and periods, remote incidents, and so forth. Photoresponsive polymeric materials which perceive and shut off the light of undesired wavelengths have tremendous potential for intelligent optical devices. However, the development of nanostructured polymeric materials to adjust light transmittance based on the amount of external irradiation is still a great challenge. Recently, photoresponsive morphological changes of micellar aggregates in solutions by UV and visible light were achieved by incorporating azobenzene into polymeric materials. The photoresponsive changes were mainly attributed to the dipole moment changes of molecules induced by photoisomerization of azobenzene groups together with hydrophilic–hydrophobic balance shifts which destabilize the self-assembled aggregates.

Self-assembled nanostructures of block copolymers both in thin films and in solutions have been intensively studied in perspective of development of nanostructured organic materials, and construction of complex nanostructured materials by self-assembly usually requires precisely defined nanomolecules where the molecular structures become primary factors to determine morphologies of self-assembled nanostructures. Among many different types of diblock copolymers, self-assembly behavior of diblock copolymers consisting of a rigid rod and a flexible coil is interesting because of the conformational asymmetry between each block and various functionalities on main chains of rod segments.

However, preparation of well-defined condensation polymers has been very difficult until the development of chain-growth condensation polymerization (CGCP), while controlled radical polymerizations of diverse vinyl monomers have been well established. Simple combination of CGCP and atom transfer radical polymerization (ATRP) allows straightforward synthesis of rod–coil type diblock copolymers composed of condensation and addition blocks with controlled molecular weights and molecular weight distributions.

Here we report the reversible dramatic transmittance changes resulting from photoinduced aggregation and segregation of self-assembled block copolymer micelles composed of well-defined rod–coil type diblock copolymers. The block copolymers were synthesized through CGCP for rod segments containing azobenzene units in the main chain, and subsequent ATRP of styrene with a proper macroinitiator for coil blocks. A nucleophilic aromatic substitution (SNAr) reaction was a key for synthesis of well-controlled poly(arylene ether azobenzene) (P1–3) by displacement of the leaving group (i.e. F or NO2) activated by a trifluoromethyl group. In cyclohexane, uniform micellar aggregates of the diblock copolymer were formed as the spherical structure consisted of the core rod and the periphery coil. Irradiated by UV light, the transmittance of the homogenous solution decreased down to maximum ca. 22%, and became turbid, but returned to a clear solution when exposed to visible light. The solution obstructs incident light whenever a certain amount of UV irradiation is illuminated.

Well-defined rod–coil type diblock copolymers (P1–3) prepared in this study are shown in Scheme 1, and their physical properties are summarized in Table 1. Details of the synthetic methods and

Department of Chemistry, Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST), 373-1, Guseong-dong, Yuseong-gu, Daejeon, 305-701, Korea. E-mail: kimsy@kaist.ac.kr; Fax: +82-42-350-8177; Tel: +82-42-350-2834
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Scheme 1 (a) Synthesis of PAEAz through CGCP. (b) End-group modification of PAEAz. (c) ATRP of styrene with the macroinitiator for synthesizing well-defined block copolymers.
characterization of the block copolymers are described in the ESI.† Polycondensation of the AB’ type monomer (1) proceeded in a chain-growth manner under the certain reaction conditions (ESI†). CGCP of 1 produced well-defined PAEAz (Mn: 2.0 kDa, PDI: 1.09) with the proper feed ratio. The molecular weights of the polymers were well matched with the theoretical values as the conversion of the monomers increased, and the constant number of propagating species was maintained. However, it was difficult to obtain high molecular weights (>5 kDa) of polymers with a narrow polydisperse index (PDI) presumably because of the transetherification caused by the strongly activated ether bond between an initiator moiety and a monomer. For ATRP of coil blocks, the end groups of the polymers were modified to macroinitiator, PAEAzNBr, and used for polymerization of styrene monomers. GPC analysis of the polymerization product revealed that all the macroinitiators were not initiated, indicating that the efficiency of the amide-linked macroinitiator was rather low in ATRP of styrene.13 However, the unreacted macroinitiator was easily separated from the block copolymer by extraction with cyclohexane (ESI†).

The synthesized PAEAz is soluble in many organic solvents including NMP, THF, ethylacetate, toluene, and chloroform, but is not soluble in cyclohexane that dissolves polystyrene. Therefore, block copolymer micelles of the rod-coil diblock copolymers were prepared by addition of cyclohexane into the THF solution of the diblock copolymers and subsequent dialysis to remove THF. Because the block copolymers (e.g., P3) having molecular weight above 20 kDa were not dissolved in cyclohexane, only the diblock copolymer micelles of P1 and P2 were prepared. A dynamic light scattering (DLS) study (Fig. 1a) of the cyclohexane solutions shows the hydrodynamic diameter of 190 nm of the self-assembled block copolymer micelles with quite narrow distributions (PDI: 0.005), and TEM images (Fig. 1b) reveal the regular spherical shape of the micelles consisting of azo blocks in the core and PS blocks in the shell. The SEM image (Fig. 1c) also shows that the diblock copolymer micelles have narrow size distribution with the diameter of about 90 nm which is less than that of the DLS result due to a contraction of the micelles.

The diblock copolymer micelle showed photoresponsive aggregation and segregation behavior that was large enough to be detected with the naked eye, unlike the previously reported8 coil type block copolymer micelles. The clear cyclohexane solution of diblock copolymer micelles became turbid when it was exposed to UV light, but returned to a clear solution with exposure to visible light. Fig. 2a shows a photoinduced reversible transmittance modulation of the self-assembled block copolymer micelles. The reversible changes in turbidity of the solution were observed with alternating UV and visible light irradiation (Fig. 2b). While the transmittance of the cyclohexane solution...
of the P2 micelle reduced to 30%, the transmittance of the P1 micelles decreased to 22% because of the larger volume fraction of the azobenzene units in P1. The photoinduced transmittance change was the result of the aggregation and segregation of the self-assembled block copolymer micelles with the size change from nanometres to micrometres. The well-defined rod–coil type diblock copolymers became turbid. However, subsequent irradiation of visible light concomitant increase of the n–p transition absorption bands of the rigid backbone.

The bent isomerization of the azobenzene groups occurred upon irradiation of UV light than for the films prepared from the solution without the dipole moment change of the diblock copolymers, the thin films of the polymer were prepared and their contact angles were measured (Fig. 3). The advancing contact angle was greater for the films prepared from the solution with UV-exposure. It seems that the increased hydrophilicity of a polar cis conformation causes the further aggregation of diblock copolymer micelles in a thermodynamically unstable state in the nonpolar solvent, cyclohexane. Even though the volume fraction of the rod blocks is smaller than that of the coil, the conformational changes of rod blocks are significant and amplified through consecutive conformational changes of the rigid backbone.

To monitor the photoisomerization of azobenzene units of the diblock copolymers, we investigated the UV-visible absorption spectra of the block copolymers (ESI†). As expected, trans-to-cis isomerization of the azobenzene groups occurred upon irradiation of UV light, and the n–π* transition absorption bands of the trans-azobenzene moieties at around 360 nm decreased with the concomitant increase of the n–π* transition absorption bands of the cis isomer at around 440 nm. After UV light irradiation for several minutes, baseline shifted abruptly because the solution became turbid. However, subsequent irradiation of visible light to the heterogeneous solution restored the original spectrum with stable baseline in a few seconds.

In conclusion, we have demonstrated photoinduced reversible transmittance modulation of the rod–coil diblock copolymer micelle. The well-defined rod-coil type diblock copolymers were synthesized through combination of CGCP and ATRP. The dipole moment change induced by photoisomerization of azobenzene incorporated along the backbone into the rod segment plays an important role in photoinduced aggregation and segregation of the self-assembled diblock copolymer micelles in cyclohexane. The diblock copolymers containing azobenzene in the main chain are expected to find many interesting applications.

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Notes and references