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First-principles investigation of the electronic and Li-ion diffusion properties of LiFePO₄ by sulfur surface modification

Guigui Xu,¹,²,³,a) Kehua Zhong,²,³ Jian-Min Zhang,²,³ and Zhigao Huang²,³,a)
¹Concord University College Fujian Normal University, Fuzhou 350117, China
²College of Physics and Energy, Fujian Normal University, Fuzhou 350117, China
³Fujian Provincial Key Laboratory of Quantum Manipulation and New Energy Materials, Fuzhou 350117, China

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We present a first-principles calculation for the electronic and Li-ion diffusion properties of the LiFePO₄ (010) surface modified by sulfur. The calculated formation energy indicates that the sulfur adsorption on the (010) surface of the LiFePO₄ is energetically favored. Sulfur is found to form Fe-S bond with iron. A much narrower band gap (0.67 eV) of the sulfur surface-modified LiFePO₄ [S-LiFePO₄ (010)] is obtained, indicating the better electronic conductive properties. By the nudged elastic band method, our calculations show that the activation energy of Li ions diffusion along the one-dimensional channel on the surface can be effectively reduced by sulfur surface modification. In addition, the surface diffusion coefficient of S-LiFePO₄ (010) is estimated to be about 10⁻¹¹ (cm²/s) at room temperature, which implies that sulfur modification will give rise to a higher Li ion carrier mobility and enhanced electrochemical performance. © 2014 AIP Publishing LLC.

I. INTRODUCTION

LiFePO₄ is a promising new-generation cathode material for Li rechargeable batteries due to its high energy density, good thermal stability, low cost, and environmental friendliness.¹⁻³ However, poor intrinsic electronic and ionic conductivity hampers its extensive application in high-rate lithium ion batteries.⁴,⁵ To overcome this limitation, various approaches of synthesis and material modification have been devoted to enhancing the electronic and ionic conduction for LiFePO₄ in recent years.⁶⁻¹¹ Surface modification is well-known as an effective way to improve the rate performance of LiFePO₄ cathode. For instance, early studied results indicated that, with carbon coating, Li ions can be reversibly extracted out of LiFePO₄, giving rise to a capacity as high as 160 mAh/g that is close to the theoretical capacity of 170 mAh/g.¹² Recently, Lin et al.¹¹ revealed that the Sn-coated LiFePO₄/C exhibits higher capacity, better cyclability and higher rate capability in a wide operation temperature range. Park et al.¹³ found that anion surface modification of LiFePO₄ can greatly improve the charge transfer kinetics and the charge/discharge performance owing to the stronger Li⁺ binding on the surface sites in the presence of nitrogen or sulfur on the surface of LiFePO₄. However, despite the observed electrochemical performance improvement of the surface-modified LiFePO₄, in-depth theoretical understanding about the origin of the improvement in terms of an electronic and ionic contribution and what causes these differences have not been clearly achieved yet.

Previous reports gave theoretical¹⁴,¹⁵ and experimental¹⁶ evidence of one-dimensional lithium ion diffusion pathway along [010] direction in LiFePO₄. In addition, based on LiFePO₄ surface simulation using first-principles calculations, Wang et al.¹⁷ found that the (010) surface is prominent in the crystal morphology. Moreover, plate-like LiFePO₄ nanocrystallites with preferential growth of the (010) lattice plane have been successfully prepared in experiment.¹⁸ Therefore, in this work, we would like to focus our study on the (010) surface of the LiFePO₄ since it is normal to the favored [010] diffusion pathway, which facilitates Li access to all the particle volume. Recently, Dathar et al.¹⁹ reported that surface diffusion has the higher activation energy than bulk diffusion, which could contribute to slow kinetics in nanostructured LiFePO₄ cathode. Therefore, efforts to reduce the surface diffusion barrier are essential in order to optimize rate performance. In this paper, we report a method to enhance the electronic and ionic conduction by the introduction of sulfur to the LiFePO₄ (010) surface. Here, we mainly investigate the electronic and Li-ion diffusion properties of the sulfur-modified LiFePO₄ (010) surface [S-LiFePO₄ (010)] using DFT+U method and to explore the effects of the surface modification on the rate performance. Additionally, the framework of density functional theory (DFT) was employed together with the climbing image nudged elastic band method (NEB) to gain insights about the lithium migration pathways as well as the diffusion barriers.

II. METHOD

Calculations were performed based on density functional theory in the generalized gradient approximation (GGA)²⁰ and the projector-augmented wave (PAW) method²¹ with a plane-wave basis was employed, as implemented in the Vienna ab initio simulation package (VASP) code.²² For all calculations, an energy cutoff of 500 eV was used. Calculations for bulk olivine-type LiFePO₄ were performed using a 3 × 5 × 6 Monkhorst-Pack k-point mesh with Γ-centered. For a calculation of the electronic density of
states, a denser $k$-mesh of $6 \times 10 \times 12$ was used. The on-site Coulomb interaction of Fe-3$d$ electrons was described by a Hubbard U introduced by Dudarev et al.\textsuperscript{23} A $U_{\text{eff}}$ (U-J) value of 4.3 eV was chosen based on the average values for Fe$^{2+}$ ($U_{\text{eff}} = 3.7$ eV in LiFePO$_4$) and Fe$^{3+}$ ($U_{\text{eff}} = 4.9$ eV in FePO$_4$) calculated by Zhou et al.\textsuperscript{24} For LiFePO$_4$ olivine system, the GGA + U level of theory has been used to accurately calculate the electronic structures and to guarantee that the excess holes or electrons are properly localized.\textsuperscript{25} A ferromagnetic spin configuration was set for the Fe ions. Geometry optimizations were considered converged when the force on each atom was less than 0.01 eV/Å.

The initial unrelaxed (010) surface structure was carved out of the fully relaxed bulk LiFePO$_4$ crystal. The surface calculations were performed on a slab model.\textsuperscript{26} Convergence test with respect to the slab thickness was carried out with a $1 \times 1$ surface unit cell. It was found that a slab of 12.1 Å is sufficient to get a converged surface energy for the low energy (010) surface termination. Considering the efficiency of the computations, a smaller $1 \times 1$ surface supercell was used for the study in this work. Thus, a supercell was constructed of $1 \times 1$ unit cell on the $ac$ plane, and 12.1 Å in the $b$-direction, with 10 Å vacuum separating the periodic slabs. The Brillouin-zone integration was performed within the Monkhorst-Pack scheme using $k$ meshes of $(3 \times 6 \times 1) \text{ and } (6 \times 12 \times 1)$ for the geometry relaxation and calculation of the electronic density of states, respectively.

Minimum energy pathway (MEP) and the activation energy for Li diffusion along the [010] direction were calculated with the climbing-image nudged elastic band (NEB) method.\textsuperscript{27} Supercells containing $1 \times 2 \times 1$ unit cells were used to determine energy barriers for diffusion. Five intermediate images are constructed to interpolate the initial and final states along the Li diffusion path. In the calculation of the activation energy, all images and other ions in the supercell were allowed to relax to its equilibrium position, while the lattice parameters were held fixed.

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### A. Structure models

Olivine-type LiFePO$_4$ has an orthorhombic crystal with the space group $Pnma$ and the unit cell accommodates four LiFePO$_4$ formula-units, as shown in Fig. 1(a). The structure framework consists of FeO$_6$ octahedra and PO$_4$ tetrahedra with Li ion locating at the one-dimensional channel along [010] direction ($b$ axis). The lattice parameter of the relaxed bulk LiFePO$_4$ structure is $a = 10.427$ Å, $b = 6.057$ Å, and $c = 4.743$ Å, respectively, in good agreement with the experimental values\textsuperscript{28} and the other calculated results.\textsuperscript{29} The initial,
unrelaxed (010) surface structure was carved out from the fully relaxed bulk crystal. The low energy (010) surface termination in the [010] direction cuts through the LiO₆ octahedra but only cuts the top of the FeO₆ octahedra, leaving threefold Li and fivefold Fe exposed on the surface. The relaxed surface structure of the low energy (010) surface is shown in Fig. 1(b). To test the stability of the surface structure, we calculated the surface energy. The surface energy is defined by

$$\gamma = \frac{(E_s - nE_b)}{2S},$$  \hspace{1cm} (1)

where $$E_b$$ is the total energy per formula unit of bulk LiFePO₄, $$E_s$$ is the total energy of the given supercell containing $$n$$ formula units of LiFePO₄, and $$S$$ is the base area of the supercell. The calculated surface energy is 0.66 J/m², consistent with the value 0.64 J/m² reported by Wang et al.\textsuperscript{17}

The (010) surface adsorbed with S atom after relaxation is displayed in Fig. 1(c). The fractional coordinates of S atom is (0.662, 0.570, 0.230), which is very close to the position of Fe(1) (0.709, 0.482, 0.021) in surface-terminated sites. The S–Fe(1) bond length is 2.216 Å. The bond lengths of S–Li and S–O are 2.369 Å and 3.179 Å, respectively. The covalent interactions of S-Li and S-O are weaker due to the relatively longer bond length. Sulfur induces a dramatic geometric distortion to the surface, and the PO₄ surface groups are rotated, as seen in Fig. 1(c). To characterize the stability of the surface adsorption structure, we calculated the surface adsorption energy. Surface adsorption energy is defined as follows:

$$\Delta E_a = E_{S,010} - E_{(010)} - E_S,$$  \hspace{1cm} (2)

where $$E_{S,010}$$, $$E_{(010)}$$, and $$E_S$$ represent the DFT total energies of the S-LiFePO₄ (010), LiFePO₄ (010), and isolated S atom, respectively. The calculated surface adsorption energy is -3.40 eV. A negative value of the surface adsorption energy indicates S adsorption on the LiFePO₄ (010) surface is energetically favorable.

B. Electronic structure

The electronic structures are studied in this section. Figs. 2(a) and 2(b) show the total electronic density of states (DOS) and partial density of states (PDOS) of bulk LiFePO₄ in ferromagnetic (FM) spin configuration. From Fig. 2(a), it is found that bulk LiFePO₄ is a semiconductor with energy gap of 3.58 eV according to the GGA+U calculation, in agreement with the previously reported value (of 3.58 eV) by Hoang et al.\textsuperscript{31} and the experimental results (about 3.8–4.0 eV).\textsuperscript{32,33} The large band gap prevents the intrinsic generation of an electron or hole, so pure bulk LiFePO₄ shows poor electron conductivity. Although some recent theoretical studies have
suggested that, instead of thermal excitation of an electron or hole over the bandgap, the small polaron localized around a transition metal (TM) ion is likely to determine the electronic conductivity, our analysis based on the relationship between the band gap and electronic conductivity still provides valuable information on the electronic conductivity change. The result of PDOS in Fig. 2(b) reveals that the 3d-electrons of the Fe are the primary contributor to both the valence-band maximum (VBM) and conduction-band minimum (CBM) and the electronic states near the Fermi level (at 0 eV) result mainly from the contributions of Fe-3d and O-2p orbitals.

Fig. 3(a) shows the total DOS of the LiFePO4 (010) surface within the GGA + U level. From the figure, it is found that, compared to the larger band gap of 3.58 eV for bulk LiFePO4, a narrower band gap with 1.38 eV is obtained for the surface, which suggests that the plate-type nano-LiFePO4 with (010) surface may exhibit better electronic conduction.

From the Figs. 3(a) and 3(b), it can be seen that Fe-3d states are also the primary contributor to both the VBM and CBM. Analysis of the atomic PDOS on the surface region and the bulk material reveals only small changes for the Li and P atoms. The PDOS of Fe atoms at different positions varies substantially, as seen in Fig. 3(b). The PDOS of Fe atoms located at the surface differs greatly and leads to a narrower band gap.

Figs. 4(a) and 4(b) present the total DOS and PDOS of O-2p, S-2p, and Fe-3d of the S-LiFePO4 (010) surface. From Fig. 4(a), it can be seen that new states appear in the band gap of the pure LiFePO4 (010) surface after S adsorption and the band gap decreases from 1.38 eV to 0.67 eV, which might also contribute to the increased electronic conductivity. The gap states are induced by the interaction of the Fe-S bond and the hybridization of Fe-3d and S-2p leads to a narrower band gap, as shown in Fig. 4(b).
Fast Li diffusion in a crystal structure of electrode materials is essential to the high-power capability of Li rechargeable batteries. In this section, NEB method has been used to calculate the activation energies and determine the minimum energy paths of Li diffusion along the b-channel. It is found that the Li-ion diffusion paths along the b-channel are arch-like curves, due to electrostatic repulsion between Li ion and Fe ion, as shown in Figs. 5(a), 6(a), 6(c), 7(a), and 7(c). The calculated activation energy for Li-ion diffusion in bulk LiFePO₄ is 0.32 eV, as shown in Fig. 5(b), which is consistent with the previously reported values with DFT + U.¹⁹ Figs. 6(b) and 6(d) show activation energies for Li-ion interlayer diffusions from Li(1) site to Li(2) site and from Li(2) site to Li(3) site in different layers along the b-channel of the pure LiFePO₄ (010) surface. The calculated values are 0.66 eV and 0.64 eV, respectively. Activation energy for Li-ion surface diffusion is about 0.34 eV higher than that of bulk diffusion. Since Li ions should overcome both bulk and surface activation energies to diffuse along the b-channel, hopping through the surface barrier is likely to be a rate-limiting step for Li mobility. Therefore, the activation energy for surface diffusion must be considered for Li diffusion along the b-channel. Efforts should be made to reduce the surface diffusion barrier with proper surface modification in order to optimize rate performance.

Figs. 7(b) and 7(d) show the activation energies for Li ion diffusion along the b-channel of the S-LiFePO₄ (010) surface. The calculated values for Li ion diffusion from Li(1) site to Li(2) site and from Li(2) site to Li(3) site are 0.46 eV and 0.48 eV, respectively. Compared to the pure LiFePO₄ (010) surface, sulfur adsorption decreased activation energy of about 0.18 eV for Li-ion diffusion on the S-LiFePO₄ (010) surface, implying that the ionic conductivity would be improved obviously by sulfur surface modification. As shown in Fig. 1(c), sulfur binds directly to a surface Fe atom forming a Fe-S bond, providing full coordination of the Fe center. The electronic environment of Li⁺ is close to that in the bulk LiFePO₄ and therefore the surface activation energies decrease. The diffusion constant can be estimated as

\[ D = a^2 \nu \exp(-E_{\text{act}}/k_BT), \]

where \( \nu \) is the attempt frequency and \( E_{\text{act}} \) is the activation energy for the hop. Assuming that \( \nu \) is about \( 10^{13} \) Hz, which is generally in the range of phonon frequencies, and \( a \) is approximately 3 Å, corresponding to the distance of a hop.

### Table I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Band gap (eV)</th>
<th>Activation energy (eV)</th>
<th>Diffusion constant (cm²/s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bulk LiFePO₄</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>( 2.0 \times 10^{-8} )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LiFePO₄ (010)</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>0.66, 0.64</td>
<td>( 4.6 \times 10^{-14}, 1.3 \times 10^{-13} )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S-LiFePO₄ (010)</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.46, 0.48</td>
<td>( 1.37 \times 10^{-10}, 5 \times 10^{-11} )</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIG. 7. Minimum energy paths and activation energies for Li diffusion along the b-channel of the S-LiFePO₄ (010) surface.

TABLE I. The calculated band gaps, activation energies, and diffusion constants for bulk LiFePO₄, LiFePO₄ (010), and S-LiFePO₄ (010), respectively.
along the [010] direction. The estimated diffusion constants are listed in Table I for various models being considered. The diffusion constant of the S-LiFePO$_4$ (010) surface can be approximated to be $10^{-11}$ (cm$^2$/s) at room temperature and Li diffusivity in the S-LiFePO$_4$ (010) surface is expected to be faster by three orders of magnitude than that of the pure LiFePO$_4$ (010) surface. Therefore, it can be expected that sulfur adsorption on the LiFePO$_4$ (010) surface will improve Li ion transport properties well.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, we have investigated the electronic and Li-ion diffusion properties of the LiFePO$_4$ (010) surface modified by sulfur with first-principles calculations under the DFT + U framework. It is found that the sulfur adsorption on the LiFePO$_4$ (010) surface is energetically favored. A much narrower band gap of the S-LiFePO$_4$ (010) surface is approximated to be $10^{-11}$ (cm$^2$/s) at room temperature, which is about $10^3$ times larger than that of the pure LiFePO$_4$ (010) surface. The above results mean that the sulfur surface-modified LiFePO$_4$ will exhibit higher electronic and ionic conductivity, which gives rise to the enhanced electrochemical performance.

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