

Single Particle ICP-MS (SP-ICP-MS) For the Detection of Metal-Based Nanoparticles in Environmental Matrices: Application to Silver Nanoparticles in Surface Water

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Abstract: The National Nanotechnology Initiative defines engineered nanomaterials (ENM) as those with dimensions of 1–100 nm, where their unique characteristics enable novel applications to be carried out. ENMs often possess different properties than their bulk counterparts of the same composition, making them of great interest for a broad spectrum of industrial, commercial, and health care uses. However, the widespread application of ENMs will inevitably lead to their release into the environment, which raises concerns about their potential adverse effects on the ecosystems and their impact on human health. This paper discusses the theory of Single Particle ICP-MS (SP-ICP-MS) and in particular, its use in characterizing, counting and sizing metal-based nanoparticles in Environmental Matrices. This breakthrough advancement in ICP-MS allows researchers to track the fate/transformation of nanoparticles in various matrices. Single Particle-ICP-MS allow the differentiation between ionic and particulate signals without any separation, measure particle concentration down to as low as 1000 particles/mL with great precision and determine particle size and size distribution. With fast sample analysis time, SP-ICP-MS is a key analytical technique in assessing the fate, behavior and distribution of ENMs in different sample Environmental Matrices.

Keywords: Single Particle ICP-MS, SP-ICP-MS, Silver, Fate, Environmental Monitoring, Nanoparticles, Dissolution, Agglomeration

1. Introduction

During the last decade, the production and use of engineered nanomaterials (ENMs) have experienced a drastic increase, resulting in a potential risk of their release into the environment [1]. Therefore, the study of their impact on the environment becomes crucial. The appropriate ecological risk assessment and management of ENMs in the environment requires quantitative measurements of both exposure and effects [2] that should, ideally, be performed by in situ analysis and give physicochemical characterization. However, most analytical techniques are not suitable for environmental matrices since nanoparticle concentrations are typically very low [3].

Historically, particle size has been measured by dynamic light scattering (DLS) and transmission electron microscopy (TEM) [1,2], while dissolved content has been measured by

ultrafiltration. These common techniques have known limitations for measuring low concentrations in the presence of colloidal species in complex waters.

Alternatively, single particle inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry (SP-ICP-MS) has been found to be a promising technique for detecting and characterizing metal nanoparticles at very low concentrations. SP-ICP-MS is fast and efficient and can provide more information than other currently available techniques. It can lead to the determination of particle size, size distribution, particle number concentration, and the concentration of dissolved metal. Moreover, it can distinguish between particles of different elements.

An increasing number of papers have been recently published touching various areas of environmental research, going from environmental release [2,3,6] to the below work on the fate on nanoparticle in surface water [7] to the transformation kinetics of nanoparticles in environmental

media [8]. Other research focused on the bioavailability and bioaccumulation of nanoparticles in biota [9,10]

The aim of this work is to investigate the efficiency of SP-ICP-MS for the detection and characterization of silver nanoparticles in environmental waters where they can be involved in various physicochemical processes as shown by Figure 1



Figure 1. Possible fates of silver nanoparticles in surface waters: (A) Dissolution process leading to free ions release and smaller particles; (B) Aggregation into larger particles, which may settle out of the water, depending on the aggregate size; (C, D) Adsorption of released Ag^+ and nAg , respectively, onto other solids present in the water; (E) Formation of soluble complexes; (F) Reaction with other components in the water, which may result in precipitation; (G) nAg remaining stable.

2. Theory of Single Particle ICP-MS

Single Particle-ICP-MS involves introducing samples containing NP at environmentally-significant concentrations (ppb to ppt levels) into the ICP-MS and collecting time-resolved data. Because of the very low elemental concentrations and the transient nature of ionized nanoparticles (300 to 500 μs), high sensitivity and very short measurement times (dwell time between 10 and 100 μs) without any settling time are necessary in order to ensure the detection of individual particles as ion pulses [4,5]. The number of observed pulses (NOP) at the detector for the acquisition time is related to the particle number concentration (C_{np}) in the sample factored by the nebulization efficiency (η) of the introduction system and the introduction flow rate F (ml/min).

$$NOP = C_{np} * \eta * F$$

The size of the NP is related to the pulse intensity. SP-ICP-MS is a mass based technique thus the pulse area is measured in counts and converted into mass. The mass is then converted into size based on the density of the materials and assuming that the shape is spherical [11]. Figure 2 shows the signal from both dissolved and single nanoparticle analyses. In Figure 2a, a steady state signal results from measuring dissolved elements; the output when detecting single particles is quite different, as illustrated for 60 nm silver particles in Figure 2b. Each spike in Figure 2b represents a particle.

With fast continuous data acquisition, dwell time shorter than the particle transient time and no settling time, single particle-ICP-MS is an excellent particle counting and sizing

techniques applicable to samples that contain low level of metallic nano particles. It provide users with many important nanoparticle characteristics such as inorganic composition of individual particles, particle concentration, size and size distribution, agglomeration as well as the ability to differentiate between ionic and particulate fractions without any prior separation or labor-intensive sample preparation.

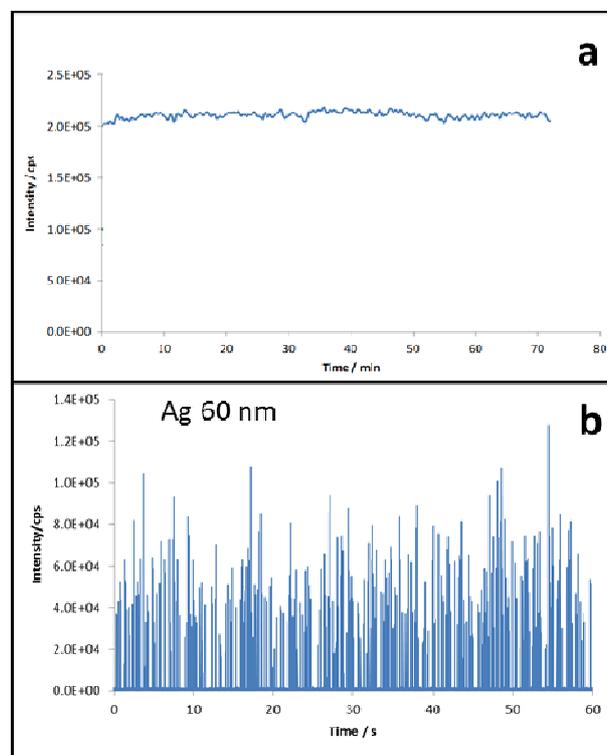


Figure 2. a) A continuous signal from measuring a dissolved analyte; b) A signal from measuring 60 nm silver nanoparticles.

3. Materials and Methods

A PerkinElmer NexION® 350X Inductively Coupled Plasma Mass Spectrometer (ICP-MS) was used for data acquisition using the Nano Application Module within Syngistix™ for ICP-MS software (SP-ICP-MS instrumental parameters are given in Table 1). The sample introduction system consisted of a quartz cyclonic spray chamber, type C0.5 concentric glass nebulizer and a 2 mm bore quartz injector. Commercially available suspensions of gold and silver nanoparticles were used in this work. A NIST reference material (RM 8013) consisting of a suspension of gold nanoparticles (60 nm nominal diameter, 50 mg/L total mass concentration and stabilized in a citrate buffer) was used to determine the nebulization efficiency. Suspensions of silver nanoparticles were purchased from Ted Pella Inc.: citrate coated (40 and 80 nm nominal diameter) and bare (80 nm nominal diameter) nanosilver suspensions (product numbers. 84050-40, 84050-80 and 15710-20SC, respectively).

The surface water was sampled in Rivière des Prairies, Montreal, Canada and filtered with 0.2 μm filter paper prior to spiking with silver nanoparticles. Nano-Ag suspensions

were added to water samples with concentrations ranging from 2.5 to 33.1 $\mu\text{g Ag L}^{-1}$ and left to equilibrate under continuous and gentle shaking. Prior to SP-ICP-MS analysis, small aliquots of the samples were diluted to below 0.2 $\mu\text{g Ag L}^{-1}$. Data acquisition was performed in triplicate measurements for each sample, and deionized (DI) water was analyzed between replicates to check memory effects.

Table 1. Instrumental parameters for SP-ICP-MS data acquisition.

| Parameter | Value |
|------------------------------|--|
| Instrument | NexION 350X ICP-MS |
| Nebulizer | Concentric |
| Spray Chamber | Cyclonic |
| Torch and Injector | Quartz Torch and Quartz 2.0 mm bore injector |
| Power (W) | 1600 |
| Plasma Gas (L/min) | 18 |
| Aux Gas (L/min) | 1.2 |
| Neb Gas (L/min) | 0.97 |
| Sample Uptake Rate (mL/min) | 0.5 |
| Sample Tubing | Black/Black |
| Dwell Time (μs) | 100 |
| Sampling Time (s) | 60 |

4. Results and Discussion

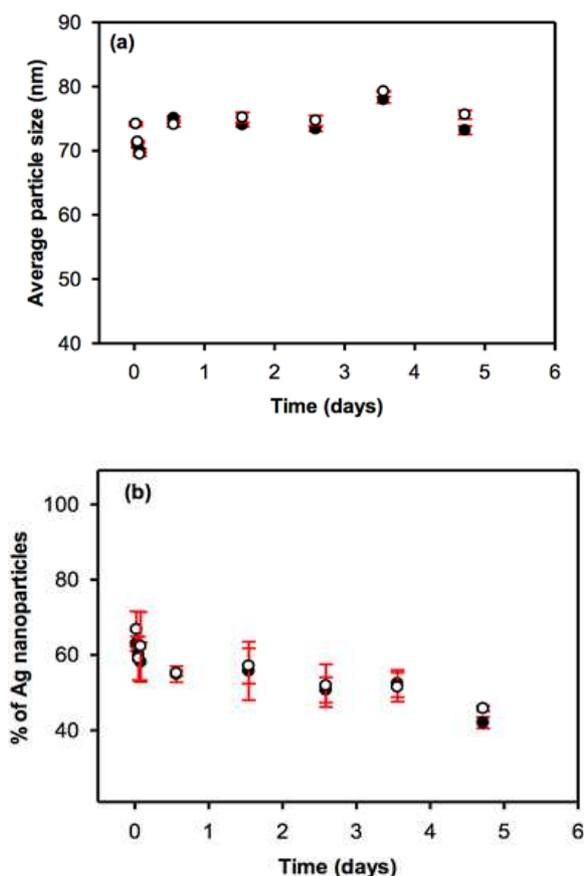


Figure 3. (a). Evolution of (a) the average particle size and (b) the proportion of particulate silver as a function of equilibration time in pure (l) and surface (o) waters. Waters were spiked with 80 nm citrate-coated nAg, and the total metal concentrations were equal to 72.2 and 72.4 ng L^{-1} in DI water and surface water, respectively

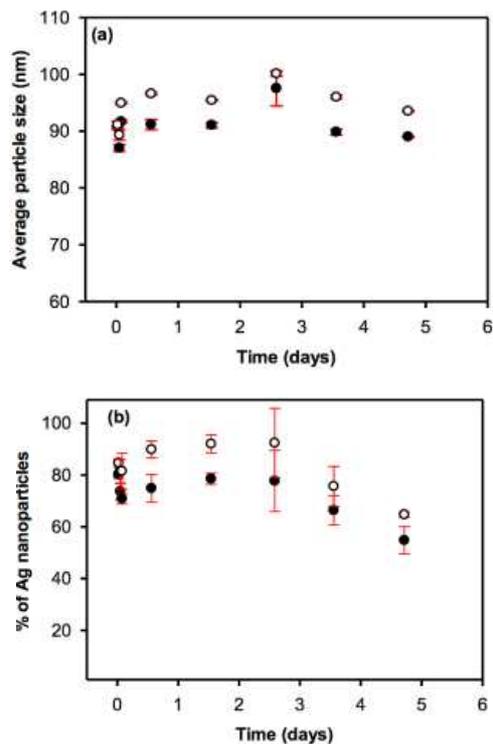


Figure 4. Evolution of (a) the average particle size and (b) the proportion of particulate silver as a function of equilibration time in pure (l) and surface (o) waters. Waters were spiked with uncoated 80 nm nAg, and the total metal concentrations were equal to 196.4 and 200.8 ng L^{-1} in DI water and surface water, respectively.

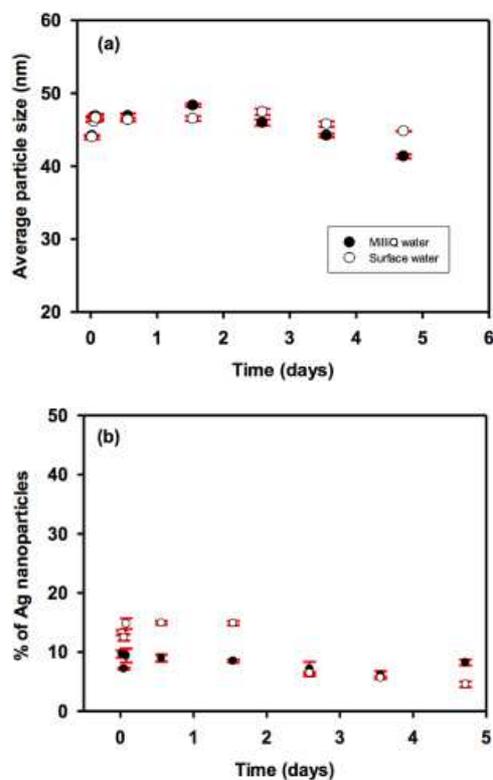


Figure 5. Evolution of (a) the average particle size and (b) the proportion of particulate silver as a function of equilibration time in pure (l) and surface (o) waters. Waters were spiked with 40 nm citrate-coated nAg, and the total metal concentrations were equal to 135.8 and 133.7 ng L^{-1} in DI water and surface water, respectively.

Fate of Silver Nanoparticles

Figures 3-5 (a) show the dissolution of Ag nanoparticles monitored though the change in average particle diameter while Figures 3-5 (b) show the particle number recovery of Ag nanoparticles over time in both pure and river water. In all cases, the average particle size of the persistent nanoparticles remains substantially constant (Figures 3a, 4a and 5a). For suspensions of particles with a nominal diameter greater than 40 nm, between 50 and 80% of the particles persist for at least five days of equilibration in pure and surface water (Figures 3b and 4b). Under the experimental conditions of this work, the coating appears to have no significant effect on the dissolution of nanoparticles over time, as both citrate-coated and bare nAg (80 nm) suspensions showed a slight decrease of particulate silver by ca. 20% during five days. In the meantime, for the same size and equilibration time, the proportion of dissolved silver was found higher in the case of citrate-coated nAg. This does not necessarily mean that bare nanosilver is more stable than citrate-coated nAg. In fact, the release of silver ions may be due to oxidation and/or to residual Ag⁺ adsorbed on the surface of nAg or bonded to the coating. Thus, we believe that the stability and behavior of nanoparticles in any medium will depend on the synthesis procedure. According to Figure 5b, smaller particles with a nominal diameter below 40 nm tend to dissolve in greater quantities, but caution should be taken here due to the limitation of the technique to the detection of particles under 20 nm.

Indeed, the signal intensity of such small nanoparticles is very low and overlaps with the background noise – therefore, all particles smaller than ca. 15 nm will be erroneously counted as dissolved metal. In the case of bare 80 nm nAg, both average particle size and percentage of particles were found higher in surface water compared to DI water (Figure 4). In the case of citrate-coated nAg, no noticeable difference in behavior was found in either aqueous media. This can be explained by the fact that bare nanoparticles are more favorable to aggregation than citrate-stabilized ones. But overall, no significant aggregation was observed.

5. Conclusions

Using the Nano App Module in the Syngistix for ICP-MS software, it was possible to study the behaviour of silver nanoparticles in surface water without using any subsequent manual data processing. The technique has allowed the effective and selective measurement of changing particle size, aggregation and dissolution over time at low concentration. SP-ICP-MS is practically the only suitable technique that can provide such information on the fate of metal nanoparticles at very low concentrations in environmental waters. Although this study only showed the effectiveness of the technique in the particular case of nAg in river water, it is, without any doubt, applicable to other types of metal and metal oxide nanoparticles in a variety of complex matrices form wastewater, effluents to biological fluids and culture media.

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