

## DOCTORAL THESIS

### Improving heavy metal bioleaching efficiency through microbiological control of inhibitory substances in anaerobically digested sludge

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**Improving Heavy Metal Bioleaching Efficiency Through Microbiological  
Control of Inhibitory Substances in Anaerobically Digested Sludge**

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**A thesis submitted for partial fulfillment of the requirements**

**for the degree of**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

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## Abstract

Iron-based bioleaching process has been proven to be a promising technique for remediation of heavy metal-laden sewage sludge before land application. However sewage sludge is composed mostly of organic matter, which was generally considered to be toxic to *Acidithiobacillus ferrooxidans*. The aim of the present study was to improve heavy metal bioleaching efficiency through identifying and controlling the potential inhibitory substance(s) present in anaerobically digested sewage sludge.

A simple and reliable plating method was essential for understanding the roles of iron-oxidizing bacteria in the bioleaching process. However isolation and enumeration of acidophilic iron-oxidizing bacteria from sludge samples is always challenged with contamination of fungal growth on solid medium. The present study showed that filtering the sludge sample through sterile No. 5 Whatman filter paper before serial dilution was an effective way to overcome this problem. FeTSB was a reliable medium for both sludge samples and pure cultures, while medium TSM1 were suitable only for pure cultures. The optimum pH for FeTSB medium ranged from 2.5 to 2.75, while pHs out of this range resulted in lower counts and a long lag period of 12-14 days for colony formation. Double-lain technique could be simplified as single-layer plating technique since introduction of heterotrophic bacteria or yeast did not led to any improvement in plating efficiency. Using this simplified plating method, an indigenous mesophilic and acidophilic chemoautotrophic iron-oxidizing bacterium *Acidithiobacillus ferrooxidans* ANYL-1 was successfully isolated from local anaerobically digested sewage sludge in Yuen Long Sewage Treatment Plant.

When this bacterium was used in sludge bioleaching, a longer bioleaching period of 4 and 6 days was required to leach Cu and Cr from fresh anaerobically digested sludge (AD) as compared to 3 and 4 days for sludge sample collected after sludge holding tank (SHT). These inhibitory effects were reconfirmed in the sludge filtrate media of two sludges which were collected from the same sewage treatment plant but at two different time periods i.e., sludge A and N. The contents of potentially inhibitory substances including selected heavy metals, anions, reducing sugars, and organic acids were determined for these two filtrates. The inhibition of iron oxidation in filtrate of Sludge A was caused mainly by acetic acid while that in Sludge N was caused by both acetic and propionic acid. The bioleaching period for maximum solubilization of Cu and Cr was extended from only 3 and 4 days for Sludge J with low levels of organic acids to 10 days for Sludge N which contained 10.8 mM acetic acid and 9.88 mM propionic acid required and 4 and 8 days for Sludge A containing 2.94 mM acetic acid.

During the bioleaching of Sludge N, there were sharp increases in total counts of both acetate- and propionate-degrader before vigorous growth of iron-oxidizing bacteria. Two yeasts (Y4 and Y5) capable of degrading acetate and/or propionate were isolated

and identified as *Pichia sp.* and *Blastoschizomyces capitatus* respectively. These two yeasts were inoculated simultaneously with the iron-oxidizing bacteria to Sludge N at the beginning of bioleaching to remove the inhibitory effects caused by acetic and propionic acid. Metal solubilization was significantly accelerated by inoculation of *B. capitatus* Y5 and the bioleaching time was reduced from 10 day in the control to 3 and 4 days for Cu and Cr, respectively. However, *Pichia sp.* Y4 did not lead to any improvement in metal solubilization. *B. capitatus* Y5 alone was enough to remove both acetic and propionic acids.

However, the lag time for iron oxidation in Sludge N with inoculation of *B. capitatus* Y5 (2 days) was still one day longer than that of the sludge with low levels of organic acids (1 day), indicating that the organic acids still exerted an initial inhibition on the growth of iron-oxidizing bacteria. To overcome this problem, the organic acid-laden sludge slurry with *B. capitatus* Y5 inoculum and iron sulfate addition was preincubated at 30°C for 24 hours before the inoculation of iron-oxidizing bacteria for bioleaching. Under this new bioleaching process (BPYb), the optimal bioleaching conditions could be achieved within 24 hours which was similar to that of the sludge with a low level of organic acids. As a result, optimum bioleaching efficiency could be reached 3 days after bioleaching while 5 days were required to reach similar metal solubilization efficiency with iron-oxidizing bacteria introduced simultaneously with *B. capitatus* Y5 after a 24-hour preincubation period.

The effect of solids content on metal bioleaching efficiency was investigated to optimize the BPYb process. The bioleaching was carried out at a  $\text{Fe}^{2+}$ /solids content ratio of 2:1. At a low solids content of 1%, no lag period existed before solubilization of Zn, Cu and Cr occurred, but a one-day lag period was observed when solids content was raised to 2-4%. Nevertheless there was no difference in the amount of Zn, Cu and Cr solubilized after 3 days of bioleaching with solids content ranged from 1-3% while treatment with 4% of solids content showed a lower solubilization of Cu and Cr. The present study demonstrated that the bioleaching could be performed at higher solids content of up to 3% without affecting the metal solubilization efficiency. Furthermore, a lower  $\text{Fe}^{2+}$ /solids content ratio of 0.75:1 and 1.00:1 was enough for significant solubilization of Zn and Cu respectively, but a  $\text{Fe}^{2+}$ /solids content ratio  $\geq 1.25:1$  was required for Cr solubilization. Sewage sludge was usually contaminated by multiple metal species, therefore a  $\text{Fe}^{2+}$ /solids content ratio of 1.25:1 was recommended for bioleaching of sewage sludge at a solids content of no more than 3%.

Under the present optimized bioleaching conditions, a reduction of 40.3% and 40.6% in the concentration of total N and total P in the sludge solids was noted respectively. However this reduction in nutrient contents was caused partly by the "dilution effect" due to the increase in solids content. With the consideration of the increase in solids content, only 6.25% of N and 7.87% of P was lost through acidic dissolution at the end of bioleaching. Although there was a slight reduction in the

content of organic matter in the solids, it should not affect much the soil conditioning properties of decontaminated sludge.

It can be concluded that the newly developed bioleaching process with a simultaneous inoculation of *B. capitatus* Y5 and iron sulfate addition at the beginning of a 24-hour preinoculation period could effectively remove the inhibitory effects caused by organic acids and remove the lag period.

## Table of Contents

Declaration	i
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	v
Table of Contents	vii
List of Tables	xx
List of Figures	xxiv
List of Plates	xxviii
List of Abbreviations	xxvix

### Section I Research Background

<b>CHAPTER ONE: AIMS AND OBJECTIVES</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Hypothesis and Objectives of the Present Study	7
1.3 Layout of Thesis	9
<b>CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW: BIOLEACHING OF HEAVY METALS FROM SEWAGE SLUDGE FOR AGRICULTURAL APPLICATION</b>	<b>11</b>
2.1 General Introduction	11

2.2	Characteristics of Sewage Sludge	13
2.2.1	Nutrients	13
2.2.2	Heavy Metals	15
2.2.3	Pathogens	18
2.2.4	Trace Organic Pollutant	20
2.3	Guidelines for Heavy Metal Contents of Sewage Sludge in Agricultural Utilization	21
2.4	Removal of Heavy Metals from Sewage Sludge	25
2.4.1	Introduction	25
2.4.2	Theory for Metal Solubilization from Sludge Solids	26
2.5	Removal of Heavy Metals from Sewage Sludge by Chemical Methods	29
2.6	Bioleaching of Heavy Metals from Sewage Sludge	34
2.6.1	Microorganisms with Potential in Leaching Metals from Sewage Sludge	34
2.6.2	Physiology of Metal-leaching Bacteria	39
2.6.3	Mechanisms for Bacterial Leaching	42
2.6.4	Inhibitory Effects of Heavy Metals, Inorganic Anions and Organic Compounds on Growth of <i>At. ferrooxidans</i> and <i>At. thiooxidans</i>	43
2.6.5	Occurrence and Survival of Iron- and/or Sulfur- Oxidizing Bacteria in Sewage Sludge	47
2.7	Processes Development for Bioleaching Heavy Metals from Sewage	50

Sludge	
2.7.1 Sulfur-based Bioleaching Process	50
2.7.2 Iron-based Bioleaching Process	54
2.8 Parameters Affecting Bioleaching Efficiency	57
2.8.1 Initial pH	57
2.8.2 Temperature	58
2.8.3 Aeration or Dissolved Oxygen (DO)	59
2.8.4 Leaching Medium	61
2.8.5 Sludge Characteristics	62
2.9 Recovery of Metals from the Leached Sludge	63
2.10 Nutrient Property of the Decontaminated Sludge	64
2.11 Conclusions	67

## **Section II Isolation and Characterization of the Indigenous**

### **Iron-oxidizing Bacteria from Anaerobically Digested Sludge**

<b>CHAPTER THREE: AN IMPROVED PROCEDURE FOR ISOLATION</b>	<b>69</b>
---	-----------

### **AND ENUMERATION OF ACIDOPHILIC IRON-OXIDIZING BACTERIA IN THE BIOLEACHING MATRIX OF SEWAGE SLUDGE**

3.1 Introduction	69
------------------	----



3.2	Materials and Methods	71
3.2.1	Enrichment of Iron-oxidizing Bacteria from Sewage Sludge	71
3.2.2	Laboratory Cultures	72
3.2.3	Solid Media	73
3.2.4	Effects of Sludge Pretreatment on Colony Formation on Solid Media TSM1, FeTSB, and MFeSo	73
3.2.5	Effects of Medium pH on Plating Efficiency of Solid Medium FeTSB	76
3.2.6	Effects of Heterotrophic Microorganisms on Plating Efficiency of Solid Medium FeTSB	76
3.2.7	Comparison of Plating Method with Other Methods for Enumeration of Iron-oxidizing Bacteria	77
3.2.8	Dynamics of Iron-oxidizing Bacteria during the Bioleaching of Anaerobically Digested Sludge	78
3.3	Results and Discussion	78
3.3.1	Effects of Sample Pretreatment on Colony Formation on Different Media	78
3.3.2	Optimization of Spread Plate Counting of Iron-oxidizing Bacteria in Sludge Enrichment and Pure Cultures	81
3.3.3	Comparison of Plating Method with Other Methods for Enumeration of Iron-oxidizing Bacteria from Sewage Sludge	86

3.3.4	Isolation of Iron-oxidizing Bacteria from Sewage Sludge	88
3.3.5	Application of the Improved Procedure in Population Dynamics	91
	Analysis of Iron-oxidizing Bacteria	
3.4	Conclusion	93
 <b>CHAPTER FOUR: FEASIBILITY OF BIOLEACHING HEAVY</b>		<b>95</b>
 <b>METALS FROM ANAEROBICALLY DIGESTED SEWAGE</b>		
 <b>SLUDGE USING THE ISOLATED INDIGENOUS</b>		
 <b>IRON-OXIDIZING BACTERIUM</b>		
4.1	Introduction	95
4.2	Materials and Methods	97
4.2.1	Sludge Sampling and Enrichment of Iron-oxidizing Bacteria	97
4.2.2	Isolation and Purification of Iron-oxidizing Bacteria	98
4.2.3	Characterization of the Isolated Iron-oxidizing Bacteria	99
4.2.3.1	Morphological Characteristics	99
4.2.3.2	Physiological Properties	100
4.2.3.3	Optimization of Growth Conditions for the Isolated Iron-oxidizing	100
	Bacterium	
4.2.4	Bioleaching of Heavy Metals from Anaerobically Digested Sludge	102
	Using the Isolated Indigenous Iron-oxidizing Bacterium	

4.3	Results and Discussion	103
4.3.1	Isolation, Characterization and Identification of the isolated Indigenous Iron-oxidizing Bacteria from Anaerobically-digested Sludge	103
4.3.2	Optimal Growth Conditions for <i>At. ferrooxidans</i> ANYL-1	106
4.3.3	Bioleaching of Heavy Metals from Anaerobically Digested Sludge by Using <i>At. ferrooxidans</i> ANYL-1	110
4.3.3.1	pH and ORP Changes during the Bioleaching Process	110
4.3.3.2	Metal Solubilization during the Bioleaching of Anaerobically Digested Sludge	113
4.4	Conclusion	117
<b>Section III Identification of Inhibitory Substances Involved in Bioleaching of Heavy Metals from Anaerobically Digested Sludge</b>		
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: IDENTIFICATION OF INHIBITORY SUBSTANCES INVOLVED IN BIOLEACHING OF HEAVY METALS FROM ANAEROBICALLY DIGESTED SEWAGE SLUDGE</b>		119
5.1	Introduction	119
5.2	Materials and Methods	121
5.2.1	Microorganism and Preparation of Inoculum	121
5.2.2	Effects of Sludge Filtrate on Ferrous Iron Oxidation by <i>At. ferrooxidans</i>	121

ANYL-1		
5.2.3	Toxic Levels of Potential Inhibitory Substances to <i>At. ferrooxidans</i> ANYL-1	123
5.2.4	Monitoring of Potential Inhibitory Compounds in Anaerobically Digested Sludge	124
5.2.5	Bioleaching of Heavy Metals from the Anaerobically Digested Sewage Sludge in the Presence of Organic Acids	125
5.3	Results and Discussion	126
5.3.1	Ferrous Iron Oxidation by <i>At. ferrooxidans</i> ANYL-1 in Sludge Filtrate Medium	126
5.3.2	Identification of Inhibitory Substance(s) in Anaerobically Digested Sludge	128
5.3.3	Ferrous Iron Oxidation during Bioleaching of Sludge A and N	133
5.3.4	Effects of Organic Acids on Metal Solubilization during the Bioleaching of Anaerobically Digested Sewage Sludge	137
5.4	Conclusion	145
<b>CHAPTER SIX: MICROBIAL SUCCESSION ASSOCIATED WITH BIOLEACHING OF HEAVY METALS FROM ORGANIC ACID-LADEN ANAEROBICALLY DIGESTED SEWAGE SLUDGE</b>		<b>147</b>

6.1	Introduction	147
6.2	Materials and Methods	148
6.2.1	Sludge Sampling and Characterization	148
6.2.2	Microorganisms and Preparation of Inoculum	149
6.2.3	Microbial Successions during the Bioleaching Process	150
6.2.4	Isolation of Indigenous Iron-oxidizing Bacteria in Sludge N and Its Sensitivity Organic Acid	152
6.3	Results and Discussion	153
6.3.1	Population Dynamics Involved in Bioleaching of Heavy Metals from Anaerobically Digested Sludge	153
6.3.1.1	Population Dynamics of Major Groups of Microorganisms	153
6.3.1.2	Population Dynamics of Specific Functional Groups of Microorganisms	155
6.3.2	Microbial Succession Associated with Bioleaching of Heavy Metals from Anaerobically Digested Sewage Sludge	159
6.3.2.1	Characterization and Identification of the Dominant Heterotrophic Microbes	159
6.3.2.2	Microbial Community and Its Succession during the Bioleaching Process	170
6.3.3	Sensitivity of Iron-oxidizing Bacteria ANYL-1, ANYL-2 and	175

ANYL-3 to Organic Acid

6.4	Conclusion	177
-----	------------	-----

#### **Section IV Enhanced Bioleaching Efficiency with Co-inoculation of *At***

*ferrooxidans* and *B. capitatus* Y5

<b>CHAPTER SEVEN: BIOLEACHING OF HEAVY METALS FROM</b>	<b>178</b>
--	------------

#### **ANAEROBICALLY DIGESTED SEWAGE SLUDGE WITH CO-INOCULATION OF IRON-OXIDIZING BACTERIA AND HETEROTROPHIC MICROORGANISMS**

7.1	Introduction	178
7.2	Materials and Methods	180
7.2.1	Collection and Storage of Sewage Sludge	180
7.2.2	Microorganisms and Preparation of Inoculum	180
7.2.3	Bioleaching Experiments	181
7.3	Results and Discussion	183
7.3.1	pH and ORP Changes during the Bioleaching Process	183
7.3.2	Iron Oxidation during the Bioleaching Process	185
7.3.3	Degradation of Acetic and Propionic Acid during the Bioleaching Process	187
7.3.4	Metal Solubilization during the Bioleaching Process	189

7.4	Conclusion	193
<b>CHAPTER EIGHT: IMPROVING HEAVY METAL BIOLEACHING</b>		<b>194</b>
<b>EFFICIENCY THROUGH INOCULATION OF</b>		
<b><i>BLASTOSCHIZOMYCES CAPITATUS</i> Y5 DURING THE</b>		
<b>PREINCUBATION OF ANAEROBICALLY DIGESTED SLUDGE</b>		
8.1	Introduction	194
8.2	Materials and Methods	195
8.2.1	Sampling and Storage of the Organic Acids-laden Anaerobically Digested Sewage Sludge	195
8.2.2	Microorganisms and Culture Media for Inoculum Preparation	196
8.2.3	Bioleaching Experiments	196
8.3	Results and Discussion	198
8.3.1	pH and ORP Changes during the Bioleaching Process	198
8.3.2	Iron Oxidation during the Bioleaching Process	200
8.3.3	Degradation of Acetic and Propionic Acid during the Bioleaching Process	203
8.3.4	Metal Solubilization during the Bioleaching Process	205
8.4	Conclusion	208

**Section V Effects of Solids Content on Bioleaching of Heavy Metals from  
Anaerobically Digested Sludge**

<b>CHAPTER NINE: EFFECTS OF SOLIDS CONTENT ON BIOLEACHING</b>	<b>210</b>
<b>OF HEAVY METALS FROM ANAEROBICALLY DIGESTED SEWAGE SLUDGE</b>	
9.1 Introduction	210
9.2 Materials and Methods	211
9.2.1 Sludge Sampling and Characterization	211
9.2.2 Microorganisms and Culture Media	212
9.2.3 Bioleaching Experiments	213
9.2.4 Sampling and Chemical Analysis	215
9.3 Results and Discussion	216
9.3.1 Effects of Solids Content on Bioleaching of Heavy Metals from Anaerobically Digested Sewage Sludge at A Fe <sup>2+</sup> /Solid Content Ratio of 2 : 1	216
9.3.1.1 pH and ORP Changes during the Bioleaching Process	216
9.3.1.2 Iron Oxidation during the Bioleaching Process	216
9.3.1.3 Metal Solubilization during the Bioleaching Process	220
9.3.2 Effects of Ferrous Iron to Solids Content Ratio on Bioleaching of Heavy Metals from Anaerobically Digested Sewage Sludge at High	225



Solids Content	
9.3.2.1	pH and ORP Changes during the Bioleaching Process 225
9.3.2.2	Iron Oxidation during the Bioleaching Process 225
9.3.2.3	Metal Solubilization during the Bioleaching Process 228
9.3.3	Residual Metals and Nutrient Properties of the Decontaminated Sewage Sludge 232
9.4	Conclusion 238
 <b>Section VI General Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations</b>	
	<b>CHAPTER TEN: GENERAL DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH</b> 240
10.1	Introduction 240
10.2	Methodology for Isolation and Enumeration of Acidophilic Iron-oxidizing Bacteria from the Sewage Sludge 240
10.3	Identification of the Inhibitory Substances Involved in the Bioleaching of Heavy Metals from Anaerobically Digested Sewage Sludge 242
10.4	Improving the Bioleaching Efficiency through Microbiological Control of Inhibitory Organic Acids during the Bioleaching of Anaerobically Digested Sewage Sludge 245

10.5	Effects of Solids Content on Bioleaching of Heavy Metals from Anaerobically Digested Sewage Sludge	248
10.6	Recommendations for Further Studies	250
	References	252
	Curriculum Vitae	275