

Electrocatalytic Synthesis of Green Chemicals

Bijesh Verma¹, Sruti Pandey², Mehul S. Sharma³, Kavita Nair⁴

Associate Professor¹, Assistant Professor²

Department of Chemical Sciences

Eastern Research College, India

Email ID : bijeshverma6@gmail.com¹, sruti_100pandey@yahoo.com²

Abstract

The growing demand for sustainable chemical processes has accelerated interest in electrocatalytic synthesis as a promising route for producing green chemicals. Unlike conventional thermochemical methods, electrocatalysis operates under mild conditions and enables direct utilization of renewable electricity to drive chemical transformations. This approach offers significant advantages in terms of energy efficiency, selectivity, and reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. Electrocatalytic pathways have been extensively explored for the synthesis of value-added chemicals such as hydrogen, ammonia, carbon monoxide, formic acid, methanol, and hydrogen peroxide, often using abundant feedstocks like water, nitrogen, and carbon dioxide. This review discusses the fundamental principles of electrocatalytic synthesis, key electrocatalyst materials, reaction mechanisms, and recent advances in green chemical production. Special emphasis is placed on carbon dioxide reduction, nitrogen reduction, and biomass-derived electrosynthesis. Current challenges related to catalyst stability, scalability, and system integration are also addressed. The paper concludes by highlighting future perspectives and the role of electrocatalysis in enabling a low-carbon chemical industry.

Keywords: *Electrocatalysis; Green chemicals; CO₂ reduction; Nitrogen reduction; Sustainable synthesis; Renewable electricity*

INTRODUCTION

The chemical industry plays a central role in modern society, providing fuels, fertilizers, polymers, pharmaceuticals, and specialty chemicals. However, traditional chemical manufacturing processes are largely dependent on fossil resources and energy-intensive operations, which contribute significantly to global greenhouse gas emissions and environmental degradation. In recent years, the concept of green chemistry has gained attention as a framework to redesign chemical processes that minimize waste, toxicity, and energy consumption.

Electrocatalytic synthesis has emerged as a powerful and versatile strategy for green chemical production. In electrocatalytic systems, chemical reactions are driven by electrical energy rather than thermal energy, allowing precise control over reaction pathways through applied potential. When powered by renewable electricity sources such as solar or wind, electrocatalysis offers a nearly carbon-neutral route for chemical synthesis.

Historically, electrocatalysis has been used in well-established processes such as water electrolysis and chlor-alkali production. Recently, advances in materials science, nanotechnology, and electrochemical engineering have expanded its application toward complex chemical transformations. These include the conversion of carbon dioxide into fuels and chemicals, electrochemical nitrogen fixation, and selective oxidation or reduction of organic molecules.

This review focuses on the electrocatalytic synthesis of green chemicals, discussing key principles, catalyst design strategies, and representative reactions. The aim is to provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of the field while identifying challenges that must be overcome for large-scale implementation.

Fundamentals of Electrocatalytic Synthesis

Electrocatalytic synthesis is based on electrochemical reactions occurring at the interface between a solid electrode and a liquid or solid electrolyte. At this interface, electrical energy is converted directly into chemical energy through controlled electron transfer reactions. Unlike conventional catalytic processes that rely primarily on heat and pressure, electrocatalysis allows reactions to proceed under relatively mild conditions, often close to ambient temperature and pressure. This characteristic makes electrocatalytic routes particularly attractive for sustainable and green chemical production.

The electrode plays a dual role in electrocatalytic systems. First, it acts as an electron conductor, supplying or removing electrons from reacting species. Second, it functions as a catalyst by providing active surface sites that lower the activation energy of the reaction and stabilize key intermediates. The efficiency of an electrocatalytic process is therefore strongly dependent on the physicochemical properties of the electrode material.

Several factors collectively determine the overall reaction rate, product distribution, and energy efficiency. These include the elemental composition of the electrode, surface morphology, crystallographic orientation, electronic structure, and the nature of defects or dopants present. In addition, external parameters such as applied potential, current density, temperature, and electrolyte composition significantly influence electrocatalytic performance. A careful balance of these factors is required to achieve high activity and selectivity toward desired green chemicals.

Electrochemical Reaction Mechanism

In a typical electrocatalytic reaction, reactant molecules from the electrolyte first diffuse to the electrode surface, where they adsorb onto catalytically active sites. Once adsorbed, these molecules undergo a sequence of elementary reaction steps involving electron transfer, bond breaking, and bond formation. Most electrocatalytic reactions relevant to green chemistry involve proton-coupled electron transfer (PCET) processes, where the movement of electrons is closely linked to the transfer of protons.

The strength with which reaction intermediates bind to the electrode surface is a key descriptor of catalytic performance. If intermediates bind too strongly, they may block active sites and inhibit further reaction, leading to catalyst deactivation or surface poisoning. On the other hand, if binding is too weak, intermediates may desorb before completing the reaction sequence, resulting in low activity or poor selectivity. Therefore, an optimal intermediate binding strength is essential for efficient catalysis.

This balance is often illustrated using volcano plots, which correlate catalytic activity with adsorption energy of key intermediates. Catalysts located near the верш (peak) of the volcano exhibit the best compromise between activity and stability. Volcano-type relationships have been widely used to rationalize trends in electrocatalytic reactions such as hydrogen evolution, oxygen reduction, and carbon dioxide reduction.

To achieve optimal binding energies, researchers frequently tune the electronic structure of catalysts through alloying, heteroatom doping, strain engineering, or nanostructuring. For example, alloying can modify the d-band center of metal catalysts, thereby adjusting their interaction with adsorbed species. Similarly, nanostructured materials expose high-index facets and defect sites that can enhance catalytic activity by providing unique adsorption environments.

Role of Electrolyte and Cell Design

The electrolyte is not merely an ion-conducting medium but plays an active role in electrocatalytic reactions. Its composition directly affects ionic conductivity, interfacial charge transfer, and the availability of protons or other reactive species. Parameters such as pH, buffer capacity, solvent polarity, and the identity of dissolved ions can significantly influence reaction kinetics and product selectivity.

For instance, pH determines proton availability and can shift reaction pathways between proton-rich and proton-poor mechanisms. In carbon dioxide reduction, alkaline electrolytes often favor multi-electron transfer reactions, while acidic environments may promote hydrogen evolution as

a competing process. Similarly, the nature of alkali metal cations has been shown to affect the stabilization of reaction intermediates through electrostatic interactions near the electrode surface. Beyond electrolyte composition, electrochemical cell design is equally critical for practical electrocatalytic synthesis. Traditional H-type cells are commonly used for fundamental studies but suffer from limited mass transport and low current densities. To overcome these limitations, advanced reactor configurations such as flow cells and gas diffusion electrodes have been developed. These systems enable efficient delivery of gaseous reactants, improved reactant utilization, and higher reaction rates.

Membrane-separated cells, employing ion-exchange membranes, allow physical separation of anodic and cathodic reactions. This separation minimizes product crossover, enhances safety, and simplifies downstream product purification. As electrocatalytic processes move toward industrial relevance, the integration of optimized electrolytes with well-designed electrochemical reactors will be essential for achieving high efficiency, scalability, and long-term stability.

Electrocatalyst Materials for Green Chemical Synthesis

The development of efficient, selective, and durable electrocatalyst materials is a fundamental requirement for advancing electrocatalytic synthesis toward practical and sustainable applications. Since electrocatalytic reactions occur at the electrode–electrolyte interface, the nature of the catalyst surface directly governs reaction pathways, energy efficiency, and product distribution. An ideal electrocatalyst should exhibit high catalytic activity, long-term stability, resistance to corrosion, and minimal reliance on scarce or toxic elements.

Over the past decades, a broad range of materials has been investigated for electrocatalytic applications. These include noble metals, transition metals, metal oxides, sulfides, phosphides, nitrides, carbides, and carbon-based materials. Each class of materials offers distinct advantages and limitations in terms of activity, cost, and environmental impact. Consequently, current research is focused not only on discovering new catalyst materials but also on tailoring their structure, composition, and surface chemistry to enhance performance for green chemical synthesis.

Noble Metal-Based Catalysts

Noble metal-based catalysts have historically played a dominant role in electrocatalysis due to their superior electrical conductivity, well-defined surface chemistry, and excellent resistance to corrosion. Metals such as platinum, palladium, gold, and silver are widely regarded as benchmark electrocatalysts for a variety of electrochemical reactions.

Platinum remains the most efficient catalyst for the hydrogen evolution reaction (HER), exhibiting near-zero overpotential and high exchange current density. Its ability to optimally bind hydrogen intermediates makes it an ideal reference material for evaluating new HER catalysts. Palladium has also shown strong activity for hydrogen-related reactions and is often used in formic acid oxidation and hydrogen storage applications.

Gold and silver, although less active for hydrogen evolution, have attracted significant attention for carbon dioxide reduction reactions. These metals exhibit high selectivity toward carbon monoxide formation, primarily due to their weak binding of hydrogen and moderate interaction with CO₂-derived intermediates. Such selectivity makes them attractive for syngas production and downstream chemical synthesis.

Despite their excellent catalytic properties, the widespread deployment of noble metal catalysts is severely limited by their high cost, low natural abundance, and susceptibility to poisoning by impurities. Additionally, large-scale applications raise concerns related to resource sustainability. As a result, research efforts increasingly focus on reducing noble metal loading through nanostructuring, alloy formation, or the use of single-atom catalysts, where isolated noble metal atoms are dispersed on suitable supports to maximize atom efficiency.

Earth-Abundant Catalysts

To overcome the economic and sustainability challenges associated with noble metals, considerable attention has been directed toward the development of electrocatalysts based on earth-abundant elements. Metals such as iron, nickel, cobalt, copper, and manganese are widely

available, relatively inexpensive, and environmentally benign, making them attractive candidates for green chemical synthesis.

Among these, copper occupies a unique position in electrocatalysis, particularly for carbon dioxide reduction. Unlike most metals that favor either carbon monoxide or formate formation, copper can facilitate C–C coupling reactions, leading to the formation of multi-carbon products such as ethylene, ethanol, and propanol. This distinctive behavior is attributed to copper's intermediate binding strength toward key carbonaceous intermediates, enabling further reduction and coupling steps.

Nickel- and cobalt-based catalysts have demonstrated promising performance in hydrogen evolution, oxygen evolution, and organic electrosynthesis. Their activity can be significantly enhanced through alloying, surface modification, or incorporation into phosphide and sulfide phases. For example, nickel phosphides and cobalt sulfides exhibit favorable electronic structures and improved conductivity, resulting in lower overpotentials and enhanced stability.

Transition metal nitrides and carbides have emerged as an important class of earth-abundant electrocatalysts due to their metallic conductivity and tunable surface properties. These materials often exhibit catalytic behavior similar to noble metals, earning them the description of “noble-metal-like” catalysts. Their robust chemical stability under harsh electrochemical conditions further enhances their suitability for long-term operation.

In addition to metallic compounds, carbon-based materials such as doped graphene, carbon nanotubes, and porous carbon frameworks are increasingly used either as standalone catalysts or as supports for active metal sites. Heteroatom doping with elements like nitrogen, sulfur, or phosphorus can introduce active sites and modify electronic properties, enabling selective catalysis for reactions such as oxygen reduction and hydrogen peroxide synthesis.

Overall, earth-abundant electrocatalysts represent a critical pathway toward scalable and economically viable electrocatalytic systems. Continued advances in material synthesis,

characterization, and theoretical modeling are expected to further improve their performance and accelerate their adoption in green chemical manufacturing.

Table 1. Common Electrocatalysts and Target Green Chemicals

Electrocatalyst Material	Target Reaction	Main Products
Pt, Ni-based alloys	Water splitting	H ₂ , O ₂
Cu, Cu-oxide	CO ₂ reduction	CO, CH ₄ , C ₂ H ₄
Fe, Mo compounds	N ₂ reduction	NH ₃
Carbon-based catalysts	O ₂ reduction	H ₂ O ₂
Ni, Co phosphides	Organic electrosynthesis	Alcohols, acids

Electrocatalytic Reduction of Carbon Dioxide

The electrocatalytic reduction of carbon dioxide (CO₂RR) has emerged as a central research focus in the field of sustainable chemistry, as it directly addresses two major global challenges: rising atmospheric CO₂ levels and the need for renewable routes to fuels and chemicals. By using electricity to drive CO₂ conversion under mild conditions, CO₂RR offers a promising alternative to conventional thermochemical processes that typically require high temperatures and pressures. From a chemical perspective, CO₂ is a highly stable and thermodynamically inert molecule, which makes its activation particularly challenging. The electrochemical reduction of CO₂ involves multiple proton-coupled electron transfer steps and can proceed through a variety of reaction pathways, leading to a wide range of possible products. Depending on the catalyst material, applied potential, electrolyte composition, and local reaction environment, CO₂ can be selectively converted into carbon monoxide, formic acid, methane, ethylene, ethanol, and other oxygenated hydrocarbons.

Reaction Pathways and Product Distribution

CO₂ reduction reactions are inherently complex due to the presence of many competing pathways with similar thermodynamic potentials. For example, the two-electron reduction of CO₂ leads to

carbon monoxide or formate, while deeper reductions involving six to twelve electrons are required to form hydrocarbons and alcohols. Each pathway involves distinct reaction intermediates, such as $^*\text{COOH}$, $^*\text{CO}$, $^*\text{CHO}$, and $^*\text{OCCO}$ species, whose stability is strongly influenced by the catalyst surface.

Product distribution is therefore highly sensitive to catalyst–intermediate interactions. Catalysts that stabilize $^*\text{COOH}$ intermediates tend to favor formate formation, whereas those that efficiently desorb $^*\text{CO}$ promote carbon monoxide production. The ability to further reduce $^*\text{CO}$ is a critical requirement for forming multi-carbon products, making catalyst design a key factor in determining selectivity.

Copper-Based Catalysts and C–C Coupling

Among all known electrocatalysts, copper-based materials occupy a unique position in CO_2RR research. Copper is the only metal that can effectively catalyze the formation of multi-carbon (C_2+) products such as ethylene, ethanol, and propanol with appreciable efficiency. This distinctive behavior is attributed to copper's moderate binding strength toward carbon monoxide intermediates, which allows $^*\text{CO}$ species to remain on the surface long enough to undergo C–C coupling reactions.

However, copper catalysts often exhibit broad product distributions, leading to mixtures of gases and liquids that complicate downstream separation. Moreover, the hydrogen evolution reaction (HER) competes strongly with CO_2RR , especially at negative potentials, reducing overall carbon efficiency. Controlling selectivity toward a specific product remains one of the most significant challenges in this field.

To address these issues, various strategies have been employed to tune the catalytic behavior of copper. These include surface oxidation, alloying with other metals, and controlling crystal facets. For example, oxide-derived copper catalysts have been shown to enhance C–C coupling by stabilizing key intermediates and increasing surface roughness, thereby creating more active sites.

Influence of Electrolyte and Local Reaction Environment

The electrolyte plays a critical role in CO₂ electroreduction by influencing both reaction kinetics and selectivity. Parameters such as pH, buffer capacity, and the nature of cations have been shown to significantly affect CO₂RR outcomes. Larger alkali metal cations, such as cesium or potassium, can enhance C₂⁺ product formation by modifying the electric double layer and stabilizing negatively charged intermediates near the electrode surface.

Local reaction conditions, including CO₂ concentration and mass transport, also impact catalytic performance. In conventional aqueous systems, limited CO₂ solubility can restrict reaction rates. To overcome this limitation, gas diffusion electrodes have been widely adopted, allowing direct supply of gaseous CO₂ to the catalyst surface. These systems enable higher current densities and improved utilization of CO₂.

Recent Advances and Remaining Challenges

Recent progress in CO₂RR has been driven by advances in catalyst synthesis, in situ characterization, and theoretical modeling. Surface modification techniques, such as organic functionalization and atomic-scale doping, have provided new ways to tailor catalyst–intermediate interactions. Morphology control, including the fabrication of nanocubes, nanowires, and porous structures, has further enhanced catalytic activity and selectivity.

Despite these advances, several challenges remain before CO₂ electroreduction can be implemented on an industrial scale. Catalyst stability under prolonged operation, energy efficiency, and product separation are persistent issues. Additionally, integrating CO₂RR systems with renewable electricity sources requires careful consideration of intermittency and system-level optimization.

Overall, electrocatalytic CO₂ reduction represents a promising pathway toward carbon-neutral chemical production. Continued research focused on understanding reaction mechanisms and developing selective, durable catalysts is essential for translating laboratory-scale success into practical technologies.

Electrocatalytic Nitrogen Reduction to Ammonia

Ammonia is an essential chemical for fertilizer production and energy storage. The conventional Haber–Bosch process is highly energy-intensive and relies on fossil fuels. Electrocatalytic nitrogen reduction reaction (NRR) offers an alternative pathway to produce ammonia under ambient conditions.

Despite its promise, NRR faces challenges related to low reaction rates and poor selectivity, as hydrogen evolution often dominates. Researchers have explored catalysts such as iron-based materials, molybdenum sulfides, and single-atom catalysts to enhance nitrogen activation and suppress competing reactions.

Electrocatalytic Synthesis of Hydrogen Peroxide

Hydrogen peroxide is an environmentally benign oxidant widely used in chemical and wastewater treatment processes. The electrocatalytic two-electron oxygen reduction reaction ($2e^-$ ORR) enables on-site and decentralized H_2O_2 production, avoiding the energy-intensive anthraquinone process.

Carbon-based catalysts, including doped graphene and carbon black, have demonstrated high selectivity toward H_2O_2 formation. Fine-tuning surface functional groups has been shown to significantly improve efficiency.

Electrocatalytic Conversion of Biomass-Derived Molecules

Biomass-derived compounds such as glycerol, glucose, and furfural can be selectively converted into value-added chemicals through electrocatalysis. Compared to thermal catalysis, electrochemical routes allow selective oxidation or reduction under mild conditions.

For instance, glycerol oxidation can produce lactic acid, formic acid, or dihydroxyacetone depending on catalyst choice and operating potential. These processes contribute to the development of circular bioeconomy.

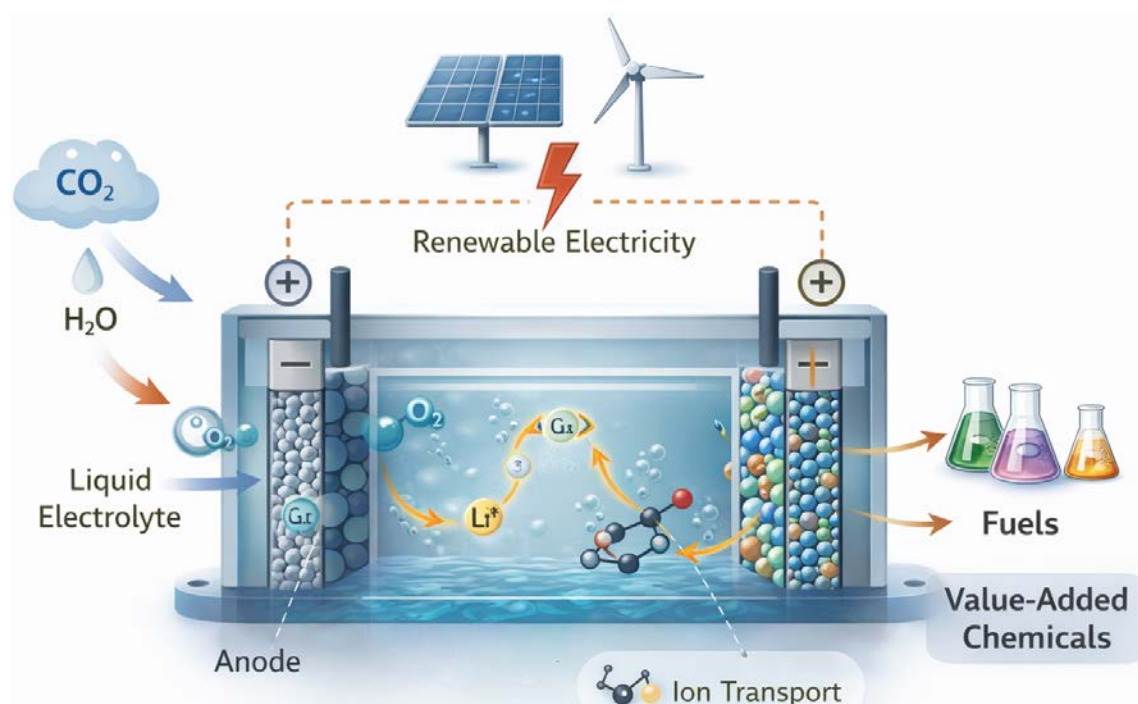


Figure 1. Schematic Representation of Electrocatalytic Green Chemical Synthesis

The figure illustrates an electrochemical cell with cathode and anode compartments separated by an ion-exchange membrane. Renewable electricity drives reduction reactions (e.g., CO₂ to fuels) at the cathode and oxidation reactions (e.g., water oxidation) at the anode, enabling sustainable chemical production.

Challenges and Future Perspectives

Although significant progress has been made, several challenges hinder the commercialization of electrocatalytic green chemical synthesis. These include limited catalyst durability, low current densities, product separation issues, and high system costs. Scaling up laboratory-scale systems to industrially relevant levels requires advances in reactor design and integration with renewable energy infrastructure.

Future research should focus on developing robust catalysts, understanding reaction mechanisms at the atomic level, and designing efficient electrochemical reactors. Interdisciplinary

collaboration between chemists, materials scientists, and engineers will be essential for translating laboratory breakthroughs into practical technologies.

CONCLUSION

Electrocatalytic synthesis represents a transformative approach for the sustainable production of green chemicals. By leveraging renewable electricity and abundant feedstocks, electrocatalysis offers pathways to reduce carbon emissions and energy consumption in the chemical industry. Significant advances in catalyst design and reaction engineering have enabled promising progress in CO₂ reduction, nitrogen fixation, and biomass conversion. However, challenges related to efficiency, selectivity, and scalability remain. Continued research and innovation are expected to play a critical role in establishing electrocatalysis as a cornerstone of future green chemical manufacturing.

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