establish the health and environmental risks from engineered nano-scale particles. Although research on the adverse effects of NPs on human health is progressing rapidly, environmental fate of NPs is still in its infancy. Before unknowingly dumping a huge amount of dangerous nanomaterials into the environment, we need to investigate the solubility and degradability of engineered NPs in soils and waters, to establish baseline information on their safety, toxicity and adaptation of soil and aquatic life. Development of novel NPs must be followed by the assessment of their potential risks on life and environment, and possible remedial measures.


Received 26 July 2006; revised accepted 30 October 2006

RAVIRAJA N. SEETHARAM1,4 KANDIKERE R. SRIDHAR2

1Department of Anatomy and Structural Biology, Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Bronx, NY 10461, USA
2Microbiology and Biotechnology, Department of Biosciences, Mangalore University, Mangalagangotri, Mangalore 574 199, India
*For correspondence. e-mail: mneelavar@yahoo.com

A modified freeze-thaw method for efficient transformation of Agrobacterium tumefaciens

There is a great potential for genetic manipulation of crop and medicinal plants to enhance productivity through increasing pest and microbial disease resistance and environmental stress tolerance, and also for studying gene function and regulation of physiological and developmental processes. Transgenic plants that transmit the introduced trait to progeny generations are produced using various DNA delivery methods such as particle acceleration, electroporation and polyethylene glycol permeabilization of protoplasts. However, most commonly used method for obtaining transgenic plants is by the Agrobacterium tumefaciens-mediated transformation. Agrobacterium can transfer DNA to a remarkably broad group of organisms – numerous dicot and monocot angiosperm species, gymnosperms and fungi, including yeast, ascomycetes and basidiomycetes. Recently, Agrobacterium was reported to transfer DNA to human cells.

The general process for manipulating genes to be transferred into the genome of plant cells is carried out in two phases. First is the cloning of the desired gene into binary vector and transforming the same into Escherichia coli. Secondly, the binary vector construct is mobilized from E. coli to Agrobacterium by triparental mating, or direct introduction of the genetically engineered binary vector construct into Agrobacterium by electroporation or freeze and thaw method. Triparental mating requires at least five to seven days in order to determine the successful mobilization into Agrobacterium and is confined to strains harbouring plasmids that carry the mob gene. Electroporation is faster and more efficient than triparental mating, but requires special equipment. Till date, the transformation frequency reported by freeze-thaw method in Agrobacterium has remained low. Here we describe a simple and reliable protocol for competent cell preparation and efficient transformation by freeze-thaw method in A. tumefaciens

A tumefaciens strain LBA4404 (pRL 4404) was procured from Rajiv Gandhi Centre for Biotechnology, Thiruvananthapuram, India. The binary vector used for transformation was the pGreen-CaCPK2 (calcium-dependent protein kinase isoform 2 cDNA isolated from Cicer arietinum L.) construct, with the neomycin phosphotransferase (nptII) gene as a selectable marker (confers to kanamycin resistance). A. tumefaciens strain LBA4404 was streaked out on a LB6 plate containing 1 mg/l rifampicin and grown at 28°C overnight. A single colony was used to inoculate 3 ml of LB medium containing 1 mg/l rifampicin and grown overnight at 28°C, shaking at 160 rpm. A 50 ml of LB medium with 1 mg/l rifampicin was inoculated with 0.5 ml (1/100th volume) of the overnight culture and grown in an incubator-shaker at 28°C at 160 rpm to obtain cell densities of 0.3, 0.4, 0.5 and 0.6 at OD600. The cultures were chilled on ice for 15 min and the cells were then harvested by centrifugation at 3000 rpm for 5 min at 4°C, resuspended in 10 ml of sterile ice-cold 50 and 100 mM MgCl2 solutions, and incubated on ice for 1 h. After another centrifugation step as above, the resulting pellet was resuspended in
sterile ice-cold 2 ml of 20 mM CaCl$_2$ and incubated on ice for 6 h to yield the competent cell suspension. Glycerol was added to a final concentration of 20% and aliquots of 100 µl were frozen in liquid N$_2$ and stored at −70°C for later use. Glycerol stocks of competent cells (100 µl) were thawed on ice for 5 min and 1 µl of pGreen-CaCPK2 construct (1 µg/µl) was added to it, mixed by gently tapping and frozen in liquid N$_2$ for 10 min and then thawed at 37°C for 5 min. Then 10 µl of this mixture was inoculated into 1 ml of pre-warmed LB medium without antibiotics and incubated for 1 h at 28°C in a rotary shaker at 160 rpm. Next 50 µl of the suspension was spread onto LB plates containing 1 mg/l rifampicin and 50 mg/l kanamycin. After incubation at 28°C for 24 h, colonies are counted. Transformation efficiency is defined as the number of colony forming units (CFU) divided by 1 µg of plasmid DNA$^{17}$. Transformant CFU = [Number of bacterial colonies \times \text{dilution ratio} \times \text{original transformation volume}] \div \text{Plated volume} \\
Transformation efficiency = \frac{\text{Transformant CFU}}{\text{Plasmid DNA (µg)}}.

A. tumefaciens cells grown in LB medium supplemented with rifampicin at OD$_{600}$ 0.3, 0.4, 0.5 and 0.6 were taken for the competent cell preparation by divalent cations, MgCl$_2$ and CaCl$_2$, treatment method. MgCl$_2$ at 50 and 100 mM concentrations with 20 mM CaCl$_2$ was tested for competent cell preparation and transformation efficiency. The optimum concentration of MgCl$_2$ needed for efficient transformation of A. tumefaciens was found to be 100 mM. Transformation efficiency was low in competent cells prepared with 50 mM MgCl$_2$ and 20 mM CaCl$_2$ concentrations (data not shown). The role of these divalent cations in transformation of A. tumefaciens is not known. However, it is well established in Diplococcus pneumoniae$^{18,19}$, wherein the presence of both magnesium and calcium ions improves the levels of genetic transformation by 30% to twofold over that obtained in the presence of calcium only.

A. tumefaciens at different growth rates for transformation efficiency with pGreen-CaCPK2 construct was investigated. It was found that OD$_{600}$0.3 was the most potent with maximum transformation efficiency of 3.6 x 10$^6$ transformants/µg DNA, whereas it gradually declined from OD$_{600}$0.3 to 0.6 cultures (Table 1). It is important that the bacterial cells must be in their early logarithmic period for efficient transformation, as evident from earlier reports$^{20,21}$. E. coli DH5α and E. coli BL21 strains proved to be highly efficient at early logarithmic phase for divalent cations-treated competent cell preparation and freeze–thaw transformation with recombinant pTZ57R/T and pRSET vectors in our laboratory$^{20}$. Transformation frequency of the binary vector pGreen-CaCPK2 construct under optimum conditions (greater than 10$^6$ transformants/µg DNA) was significantly higher than those previously reported for A. tumefaciens$^{13}$. The main factors that contribute greatly to the efficiency of transformation were the use of early logarithmic phase cells (OD$_{600}$0.3) and inclusion of 100 mM MgCl$_2$ in the preparation of competent cells.

An interesting aspect of transformation is that the efficiency depends on a particular combination of bacterial strains and plasmid-selection markers$^{31}$. Different binary vectors of almost same molecular size with different selectable markers were used for transformation of Mesorhizobium loti by freeze–thaw method. It was found that pPS1211 with spectinomycin resistance gene was highly efficient with 1.6 x 10$^5$ transformants/µg DNA compared to pART27 and pSoup with kanamycin and tetracycline selectable markers respectively$^{22}$. Therefore, the transformation efficiency obtained in our experiment can be compared to that of A. tumefaciens LBA4404 transformed with pDG128a binary plasmid vector with kanamycin resistance gene via electroporation, wherein 1–1.5 x 10$^6$ transformants/µg DNA was achieved$^{23}$. A. tumefaciens transformants were tested for the presence of pGreen-CaCPK2 construct by PCR analysis with gene-specific primers for CaCPK2 and npII genes. The plasmid DNA from A. tumefaciens was isolated using Sigma plasmid isolation kit according to the manufacturer's protocol. The primers for CaCPK2 gene were 5'-ATGGGGTAATT GTTGCCTACCTCCCTG-3' (CaCPK2-F), and 5'-CGACCTAGGCTGTATCAGC-3' (CaCPK2-R) and for npIIR gene were 5'-GCAACAACACACACACAC-3' (npIIR-F) and 5'-CCGGGCAACTTCAC-3' (npIIR-R). All the reactions were carried out in a 50 µl volume containing 100 ng of plasmid DNA, 0.1 mM dNTP mix, 0.2 µM of each primer, and 1.25 Units Taq DNA polymerase (Bangalore Genei, India) with 1× Taq reaction buffer containing 1.5 mM MgCl$_2$. The PCR was performed in a PTC-100 Programmable Thermal Controller (MJ Research Inc., USA) programmed as follows: Initial denaturation of 1 min at 94°C; followed by 30 cycles of 1 min at 94°C, 30 s at 55°C, 1 min at 72°C, and a final synthesis at 72°C for 10 min for CaCPK2 gene. For the npIIR gene the initial denaturation of 1 min at 94°C was followed by 30 cycles of 15 s at 94°C, 15 s at 56°C, 30 s at 72°C; and a final synthesis at 72°C for 5 min. PCR products were resolved on 1% (w/v) agarose gel in 1× TAE buffer stained with ethidium bromide and digitized using Uvipro (Uvitec, Cambridge, UK) digital imaging system.

PCR analysis showed the presence of the 1.6 kb amplicon (Figure 1, lane 4) and 600 bp amplicon (Figure 1, lane 3) corresponding to the CaCPK2 and npIIR genes respectively. These data were also confirmed by Southern blot analysis. The plasmids (2–5 µg) from untransformed and transformed A. tumefaciens were digested with PsfI alone and Southern

Table 1. Transformation efficiency of Agrobacterium tumefaciens with pGreen-CaCPK2 construct determined using competent cells isolated from different cell densities of the culture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. tumefaciens competent cells at OD$_{600}$</th>
<th>Transformation efficiency (transformants/µg DNA)$^b$</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>3.6 x 10$^5$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>2.4 x 10$^4$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1.8 x 10$^4$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.2 x 10$^3$</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

$^a$OD$_{600}$. Optical density at 600 nm. $^b$Colony forming units/µg of pGreen-CaCPK2 DNA.
 blot analysis was performed using a standard protocol. The 1.6 kb CaCPK2 cDNA was radiolabelled with [α-32P]dCTP by random primer labelling and used as the probe. The PstI digested pGreen-CaCPK2 construct isolated from transformed A. tumefaciens resulted in the release of 355 CaMV promoter with CaCPK2 gene (2.3 kb) and partially digested pGreen backbone with CaCPK2 gene (6.9 kb) (Figure 2a, lane 4). Southern blot hybridization with a [α-32P]dCTP-labelled CaCPK2 gene probe showed double bands (Figure 2a, lane 4), indicating the presence of pGreen-CaCPK2 construct. Agricultural biotechnology is dependent on using Agrobacterium to create genetically modified crops in order to obtain the desired agronomic traits like pest and disease resistance, and herbicide and stress tolerance. These transgenic crops have the potential to produce widespread social and economical benefits, particularly for developing countries. Usage of Agrobacterium is not only confined to plants but it also succeeded in transferring genes to human cells, suggesting the exciting possibility of human and animal gene therapy. In these pursuits, a simple, rapid and reliable protocol as presented here can be effectively used to transform A. tumefaciens with binary plasmid vector construct by freeze–thaw method.

In summary, an improved freeze–thaw method offering efficient transformation of A. tumefaciens LBA4404 with a binary vector plasmid pGreen-CaCPK2 construct has been described. Bacterial cultures grown in LB medium at OD600: 0.3, 0.4, 0.5, and 0.6 were treated with 100 mM MgCl2 and 20 mM CaCl2 for competent cell preparation and transformed with pGreen-CaCPK2 construct by freezing in liquid N2 followed by thawing at 37°C. The procedure yields maximum transformation efficiency of 3.6 × 105 transformants/μg of DNA in OD600=0.3 cultures. Transformation was further confirmed by PCR and Southern analysis. This improved freeze–thaw method is a simpler procedure to transform Agrobacterium directly with a binary vector plasmid.

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Figure 1. PCR analysis of transformed Agrobacterium tumefaciens. Plasmid DNAs isolated from transformed and untransformed A. tumefaciens were provided as the templates in PCR reactions using CaCPK2 and nap11 gene-specific primers. Lane 1, pAL 4404 (untransformed A. tumefaciens) with CaCPK2 primers; lane 2, pGreen 0029 (E. coli DH5α) with CaCPK2 primers; lane 3, pGreen-CaCPK2 construct (transformed A. tumefaciens) with nap11 primers; lane 4, pGreen-CaCPK2 construct (transformed A. tumefaciens) with CaCPK2 primers, and lane 5, 1 kb DNA marker. Arrows indicate the expected amplicons of 1.6 kb CaCPK2 and 600 bp nap11 genes.

Figure 2. Agarose gel electrophoresis and Southern blot analysis of A. tumefaciens transformed with pGreen-CaCPK2 construct. a. Plasmid DNA was isolated from untransformed A. tumefaciens, digested with PstI, resolved on 1% agarose gel, and transferred to nylon membrane. b. DNA from agarose gel was blotted onto a nylon membrane and probed with [α-32P]dCTP labelled CaCPK2 gene probe. Lane 1, Positive control CaCPK2 fragment; lane 2, pAL 4404 (untransformed A. tumefaciens); lane 3, pGreen 0029 (E. coli DH5α), and lane 4 pGreen-CaCPK2 construct (transformed A. tumefaciens). Arrows indicate a 2.3 kb fragment of 355 CaMV promoter with CaCPK2 gene.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS. This work was supported by a grant from the Department of Science and Technology, New Delhi, G.J. thanks Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore for Research Associateship. We thank Dr S. R. Syam Prakash for procuring Agrobacterium tumefaciens LBA4404 strain from Rajiv Gandhi Centre for Biotechnology.

Received 21 September 2006; revised accepted 26 July 2007

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G. JYOTHISHWARAN
D. KOTRESHA
T. SELVARAJ
S. M. SRIDESHKAN
P. K. RAUVANSHI
C. JAYABASKARAN*  

Department of Biochemistry,  
Indian Institute of Science,  
Bangalore 560 012, India  
*For correspondence.  
e-mail: cjb@biochem.issc.ernet.in