

Overview on the Employment of the $\lambda p^L/cI_{587}$ Regulation System in the Overproduction of Heterologous Protein in *Escherichia coli* Culture

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Introduction

The advancement of post-genomic biotechnology in the past two decades has increased heterologous protein titer in fermentations many folds. A great deal of effort has been spent on developing better expression hosts, vectors, as well as culture environments. As a relatively new subject, modern biotechnology is always being regarded as a 'marriage of convenience' between two fields, bioprocess engineering and genetic engineering. As far as bioprocess engineering is concerned, the progress in this discipline has not been as dynamic as in its counterpart, genetic engineering. The evidence on this matter is clearly seen if the number of research publications is used as a yardstick. Although the traditional focus of bioprocess engineering was solving classical engineering problems such as mass and energy transfer issues in the scaling up of bioreactors, recently applications have been extended into more specialized areas in fermentation such as regulating heterologous protein expression.

The interdisciplinary nature of the tasks in managing recombinant protein expression from recombinant organisms needs wider and deeper understanding at various aspects including the cell's physiological demands, genetic stability, as well as fermentation strategies. In most cases, the interactions between these aspects are unavoidably simplified by several empirical relationships. Unfortunately, due to a fairly large variation and complexity of the molecular biology among the recombinant organisms, the generality of the optimization and characterization approach for one system may not necessarily be extendable to another system. Thus, a robust and flexible bioprocess approach may be the best tool.

Escherichia coli as an Expression Host

The choice of expression hosts for heterologous protein production in the fermentation industry is determined by several factors such as processing strategies, flexibility in gene manipulation, genetic stability, promoter and vector effectiveness, regulatory approval, and patent considerations. Among the popular expression hosts for the heterologous proteins are *Escherichia coli*, *Bacillus subtilis*, Yeasts (*Saccharomyces cerevisiae*, *Kluyveromyces lactis*, *Pischia pastoris*, *Yarrowia lipolytica*), Streptomyces, filamentous fungi, insect cells, and mammalian cells (Shuler and Kargi, 1992).

In comparison to other expression hosts, *Escherichia coli* remains the most frequently employed workhorse in the production of heterologous proteins. *Escherichia coli* enjoys GRAS (generally recognized as safe) status, which greatly simplifies the experimentation required for regulatory approval and clinical trials. The popularity of *E. coli* as the expression host is due to the extensive knowledge of its genetics and physiology. This extensive knowledge in *E. coli*'s sub-cellular biology largely facilitates the manipulation of genetics including the development of well-characterized vectors and promoters (Yarranton, 1992). A depth of understanding of its physiology such as the Crabtree-like effect promotes the development of feeding strategies and allows minimizing the fermentative condition in *Escherichia coli* cultures. As a result, high-cell density cultures of up to 80 g/l dry weight (Lee and Chang, 1993; Mori *et al.*, 1979) is possible to achieve. Other attractive features of *E. coli* including high growth rate, and growth in inexpensive and easily available medium, also significantly contributed to its popularity as the expression host.

However, traditionally *E. coli* does not excrete the expressed protein into the culture broth. Hence, the disruption of cells to release the intracellular products is inevitable. The disruption of *E. coli* cells may release pyrogens (or endotoxins) that burden the purification steps. Nevertheless, endeavors to improve the secretion and excretion level of heterologous protein to the periplasmic and culture broth respectively have become an attractive research subject (e.g. in Blight *et al.*, 1994; Weikert and Bailey, 1998). As a prokaryote, *E. coli* has some disadvantages to express the cloned eucaryotic genes correctly due to lack of some biosynthetic mechanisms such as post-translational modifications, and mRNA splicing.

Studies of Heterologous Protein Expression Using Regulatable Strong Promoters in *Escherichia coli* Cultivations

As opposed to the constitutive (continuous or uncontrolled) systems, induction allows the separation of a production phase from the growth phase. Hence, high heterologous protein titer following the induction of high-density culture can be realized. The application of induction is especially critical if the expressed protein is toxic to the host. One of the basic features of an inducible system for heterologous protein expression is the use of a strong regulatable promoter. Strong promoters have a high affinity for RNA polymerase. Hence, once the inducible system is exposed to the inducing agents, the transcription of gene or operon adjacent to the promoter is enhanced. The disengagement of RNA polymerase from the plasmid after reading through the operon is also crucial, or otherwise the transcription of the undesired genes may happen. Poor disengagement of RNA polymerase from the plasmid may also potentially interrupt the plasmid-copy-number control mechanism, which may lead to the runaway replication of the plasmid and the death of the host.

Some of the most widely used regulatable strong promoters in *Escherichia coli* are *lac*, *tac* (a variation of *lac*, induced by a gratuitous inducer, isopropyl- β -D-thiogalactopyranoside (IPTG)), *trp*, p^L , and T7. Among these promoters, p^L and *tac* (or *lac*) promoter are most commonly employed. This is probably due to the extensive understanding of the promoter characteristics on the molecular level. In the lambda p^L/cI_{857} promoter system, the protein expression from the cloned gene(s) on the plasmid DNA is suppressed by lowering the culture temperature, for example between 28 °C and 32 °C. At these temperatures, the binding of the repressor protein cI_{857} blocks the transcription of gene(s) downstream of the p^L promoter. The inactivation, and hence the detachment of repressor protein cI_{857} from the plasmid DNA occurs when the temperature is at 38 °C or above. Under some circumstances, the p^L promoter is favored over the *tac* promoter due to cost and safety considerations. The use of a large amount of IPTG to activate the *tac* promoter system is not only a problem in downstream processing, but it is also costly and toxic to

humans. However, it may cause induction more rapidly and accurately than the p^L promoter system in large fermentation vessels. This is due to the rapid delivery of IPTG in comparison to heat in the fermentation broth. The thermal lag in a larger scale and the need of suboptimal pre-induction temperatures in the p^L promoter system may also significantly prolong the culture time.

Since the development of p^L/cI_{857} expression system on the cloning vector in the late seventies (Bernard and Helsinki, 1979; Bernard *et al.*, 1979), many improvements on the heterologous protein expression using bioprocess engineering knowledge on this system has been reported. Table 1 provides some overview of the bioprocess studies of p^L promoter system performed in *Escherichia coli* cultures. It is evident from the table that the focus of the studies was on three major areas, namely the importance of specific growth rate (through fed-batch or continuous culture) on productivity, the intracellular stability and solubility of expressed proteins, and optimization of induction temperature. Although some temperature-dependent modeling on the p^L promoter system has been reported (e.g. in Hortacsu and Ryu, 1990; Cockshott and Bogle, 1992, 1999), the direct effect of temperature on the productivity has not been described.

Problems Associated with the p^L Promoter System and Protein Overexpression in *Escherichia coli*

Although the p^L promoter system allows high level expression of heterologous proteins in *Escherichia coli* cultures, the deleterious side effects of protein overproduction on the host and the expressed proteins have always been a major concern. Among the obvious problems are the formation of inclusion bodies of the expressed proteins, the degradation of protein by the stress-induced proteolysis, the increased secretion of acetic acid following the induction, and plasmid instability.

Table 1: Studies employing $\lambda p^L/cI_{857}$ system for protein expression in *Escherichia coli*

Study	Author
Effect of temperature on plasmid instability	Siegel & Ryu (1985)
Heat shock effect on product degradation	Goff <i>et al.</i> (1984)
Pre-induction μ in fed-batch study	Zabriskie <i>et al.</i> (1987)
Timing and duration of induction	diPasquantonio <i>et al.</i> (1987)
Effect of substrate feeding on productivity	Whitney <i>et al.</i> (1988)
Optimization of temperature and duration	Okita <i>et al.</i> (1989)
Pre-induction μ in chemostat	Curless <i>et al.</i> (1990)
Production modelling in fed-batch culture	Cockshott & Bogle (1992)
Genetically structured modelling in chemostat study	Hortacsu & Ryu (1990)
Comparison between batch and fed-batch cultures	Strandberg & Enfors (1991)
1000-l fermentation and downstream study	Strandberg <i>et al.</i> (1991)
Fed-Batch with DO-Stat and induction timing	Seo <i>et al.</i> (1992)
Effect of pH and timing of induction	Kamasawa <i>et al.</i> (1994)
Effect of pH and temperature	Horiuchi <i>et al.</i> (1994)
Pre-induction μ in chemostat study	Curless <i>et al.</i> (1994)

Comparison between Temp. and IPTG induction	Seeger <i>et al.</i> (1995)
Effect of energy source on protein degradation	Yang & Enfors (1995)
Study of various temperatures on expression	Yabuta <i>et al.</i> (1995)
Pre-induction μ	Ryan <i>et al.</i> (1996)
Profiled temperature upshift	Lamotte <i>et al.</i> (1996)
Post-induction μ timing of induction	Lim & Jung (1998)
Production modelling in fed-batch culture	Cockshott & Bogle (1999)
Heat shock response on inclusion body formation	Hoffman & Rinas (2000)

The overexpression of a foreign protein in *Escherichia coli* regulated by a strong promoter, particularly those obtained from eucaryotes, has often been followed by the formation of inclusion bodies. These bodies are insoluble and biologically inactive resulting from the misfolding of the protein. However, under some circumstances, the formation of these bodies is favorable and intentionally designed since they are less prone to proteolytic attack. Nevertheless, time-consuming steps, such as solubilization and renaturation to recover the bioactive proteins are necessary.

The upshift of culture temperature and the following overexpression of heterologous proteins force the host to make a physiological adjustment. Amongst the important adjustments is the heat-shock response. This event is a universal response of organisms to the environmental stress such as temperature, nutrient starvation and osmotic pressure. The term 'heat-shock' was coined since it was first observed in the super-optimal temperature shifts (Enfors, 1992). This response is essential to the survival of the cells in harsh environments. Unfortunately, one of the main attributes of the heat shock response is the induction of the stress-related proteolysis that seriously degrades the heterologous proteins (Goff *et al.*, 1988).

The accumulation of acetic acid from the Crabtree-like effect in *Escherichia coli* cultures is a well-characterized phenomenon. This effect is usually overcome by maintaining the growth-limited substrate (e.g. glucose or glycerol) concentration below the threshold levels. However, in the event of energy-intensive activities such as protein overexpression, the release of acetic acid to the culture medium is evidently increased. This is due to the limitation of oxidative metabolism resulting from insufficient turnover of ATP and reducing agents such as NADH and NADPH₂ (Han *et al.*, 1992). As the alternative, the metabolism of glucose switches to fermentative pathway in order to generate more instant energy. This would implicate a feedback repression on the tricarboxylic acid (TCA) cycle, and hence protein synthesis. The acetic acid interrupts protein expression and growth mechanisms.

Although the problem with plasmid instability in *E.coli* is not as serious as in *B.subtilis* (Shuler and Kargi, 1992) or yeast (Zhang 1997), this may be a consequence of protein overexpression. A study by Stueber and Bujard (1982) revealed that the transcription of protein from efficient promoters could interfere with plasmid replication and diminish protein expression. As far as the p^L promoter system is concerned, there has been no particular bioprocess techniques designed for the purpose of minimizing plasmid instability upon a temperature upshift. Also, the effect of induction temperature on plasmid stability has not been described previously. Among the reported bioprocess strategies to circumvent the plasmid instability problem are listed in Table 2. Studies indicated that the propagation of plasmid-free cells might be overcome by limiting their growth rate by two-stage culture or recycling, separation of

plasmid-free segregants, and immobilization. Regulation of specific growth rate through two-stage fermentation and recycling either at different dilution rate or different substrate successfully minimized the destabilizing effect on plasmid. The unproductive sub-population may be separated by using selective flocculation or aqueous two-phase system. Although this may eventually increase the final specific productivity, these approaches may be problematic and costly at large scale. The employment of cell immobilization is mainly due to the fact that the restriction of growth may minimize the growth-related segregational loss. Immobilization of cells was also applied in order to 1) maintain high cell density, so that continuous operation without relying on cell growth can be applied, 2) facilitate cell separation, 3) obtain higher yield by enabling the use of mixed and spatially localized microbial cultures (Dulieu *et al.*, 1999)

From the discussion and the review of earlier studies, it could be summarized that the protein expression in the p^L promoter system is profoundly determined by the culture environment, the cell physiology, and the interaction between them. In comparison to other inducible methods, the p^L promoter system is unique due to the twofold role of temperature; it is both an inducing agent and a key factor in all biological reactions. In view of this, it is indeed a great advantage to develop an efficient integrated approach for describing the direct influence of temperature on protein expression system in the p^L promoter system.

Table 2: Bioprocess strategies in minimizing plasmid segregational instability

Inhibition of growth	Two-stage cultivation	Siegel and Ryu (1985)
Advantage of plasmid-free Cell	Recycling between: i) different dilution rates ii) different substrate concentration	Impoolsup <i>et al.</i> (1989) Stephen & Lyberatos (1985)
Separation of plasmid-free cells from plasmid-bearing cells	Selective flocculation Aqueous two-phase system	Henry <i>et al.</i> (1990) LaMarca <i>et al.</i> (1990)
Whole-cell immobilization	on <i>E.coli</i> on <i>B.subtilis</i>	Inloes <i>et al.</i> (1983) Mosbach <i>et al.</i> (1983)

Adaptation from Kumar *et al.* (1991)

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