



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

***BIODEGRADATION OF PHENOL BY A MALAYSIAN ISOLATE
Rhodococcus sp. NAM 81***

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BIODEGRADATION OF PHENOL BY A MALAYSIAN ISOLATE
***Rhodococcus* sp. NAM 81**

By

NORAZAH MOHAMMAD NAWAWI

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,
in Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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DEDICATION

This Thesis is dedicated to my beloved Husband,

Mr Nor Suhaime Sukirman

Daughters,

Miza Nur Wajihah & Miza Nur Wafiyah

and

My supportive daddy,

Tuan Haji Mohammad Nawawi Abdul Rahman

sister and brother

as well as my late mother,

Jamilah Abdul Rahman,

my thoughts and prayers are always with you Mak

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BIODEGRADATION OF PHENOL BY A MALAYSIAN ISOLATE
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November 2016

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Faculty : Biotechnology and Biomolecular Sciences

Phenol is a major threat to the environment due its toxicity effect and extensive use in various industries. Phenol can harm human and other organisms at a low dose. Phenols and phenolic compounds are organic pollutants generated from various industrial activities. Biodegradation is a technology that is currently applied for decontaminating pollutants including phenols. Biodegradation of phenols using microorganism is an eco-friendly and cost-effective approach. Bacteria are widely used in bioremediation processing. Thus, the isolation and selection of good microorganism with tolerance towards other toxicants is important to improve the performance of bioremediation. This study evaluates the potential of a local *Rhodococcus* bacteria to decompose phenol, an oxygenated hydrocarbon, one of the harmful pollutants, because of its toxic and carcinogenic effects. Ten strains of *Rhodococcus* spp. isolated from Peninsular Malaysia survived and grew in a medium that was supplemented with 0.5 gL⁻¹ of phenol. The 1500 bp phenol hydroxylase gene was amplified from the eight strains as a confirmation of phenol-degradation pathway and for future molecular marker for the presence of phenol-degrading bacteria. One strain, *Rhodococcus* sp. NAM 81 was selected as the most potent strains with the ability to decompose 0.6 gL⁻¹ phenols within 24 hours. The phenol biodegradation ability of *Rhodococcus* sp. NAM 81 was greatly affected by the presence of trace element in the medium. The parameters that supported the degradation and growth of *Rhodococcus* sp. NAM 81 were optimized initially by one-factor at a time approach. The strain exhibited highest cell growth and phenol degradation at the optimal incubation conditions of 30 °C and pH 7.5. Ammonium sulphate 0.4 gL⁻¹, glycine 0.3 gL⁻¹, and 0.1 gL⁻¹ NaCl were needed to enhance cell growth. Apart from phenol, the strain was able to utilizes 1 mg L⁻¹ of 2,4-dinitrophenol, toluene, naphthalene, diesel, acetonitrile, glycerol and waste cooking oil as the sources of carbon for growth, but the phenol degradation ability was inhibited by 1 mg L⁻¹ of Ag⁺, Cu²⁺, Cr²⁺, Cd²⁺, Zn²⁺ and Hg²⁺. Statistical approach by fractional factorial design (FFD) and response surface method (RSM) improved the biodegradation of phenol with pH, phenol and NaCl concentrations were found to be important parameters. The results showed good verification between theoretical and experimental data. RSM method improves the process by 1.2 fold for phenol

degradation and 1.3 fold for cell growth. Investigation on the application of immobilized cells in phenol biodegradation started with an evaluation of suitable matrices such as gellan gum, calcium alginate, agarose, agar-agar and polyacrylamide for phenol degradation using an immobilization approach. Gellan gum was found to be the most effective and suitable matrix for high phenol degradation compared to other matrices studied. Maximum phenol degradation was achieved at the gellan gum concentration of 0.75% (w/v), bead size of 3 mm diameter and bead number of 300 per 100 mL medium. Both free and immobilized bacteria exhibited similar rates of phenol degradation at the phenol concentration of 100 mgL⁻¹, but at higher phenol concentrations, immobilized bacteria exhibited a higher degradation rate of phenol. The immobilized cells completely degrade phenol within 108, 216, and 240 h at 1100, 1500 and 1900 mgL⁻¹ phenol, respectively, whereas free cells took 240 h to completely degrade phenol at 1100 mgL⁻¹. In overall, the rates of phenol degradation by both immobilized and free bacteria decreased gradually as the phenol concentrations were increased. It also proved that inhibition of heavy metal and respiratory inhibitors was prevented by gellan gum encapsulated cells. The immobilized cells showed no loss in phenol degrading activity after being used repeatedly for 50 repetitions of 18 h cycle and was stable after storing at 4 °C for 28 days. Study on the best disruption methods for efficient enzyme, protein and genomic DNA isolation from *Rhodococcus* cells showed that grinding for 20 minutes under liquid nitrogen was the best approach. The ortho-cleavage pathway as applied by *Rhodococcus* sp. NAM 81 for phenol degradation was discovered by biochemical and polymerase chain reaction. The gene for phenol hydroxylase; the enzyme that catalyzes the conversion of phenol to catechol, has been cloned, expressed and purified from *Rhodococcus* sp. NAM 81. SDS-PAGE produced a single band with a molecular weight of ~ 60 kDa. The potential of resting cells of *Rhodococcus* sp. NAM 81 as an alternative to the use of free and immobilized cells for phenol biodegradation process in liquid waste was also tested. The results from this study showed that *Rhodococcus* sp. NAM 81 has an excellent potential that can be applied in bioremediation of phenol-containing wastes especially using immobilized cells.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk Ijazah Doktor Falsafah

BIODEGRADASI FENOL OLEH *Rhodococcus* sp. NAM 81 PENCILAN MALAYSIA

Oleh

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Fenol merupakan satu bahan yang mengancam alam sekitar kerana kesan ketoksikan dan penggunaan yang meluas dalam pelbagai industri. Fenol membahayakan manusia dan organisma lain walaupun dalam dos yang minimum. Fenol dan sebatian fenolik merupakan pencemar organik yang dihasilkan dari pelbagai aktiviti industri. Biodegradasi adalah teknologi yang boleh digunakan untuk menguraikan bahan pencemar termasuk fenol. Biodegradasi fenol menggunakan mikroorganisma adalah satu pendekatan yang mesra alam dan ekonomi. Bakteria digunakan secara meluas dalam proses pemulihan alam sekitar. Maka, pemencilan dan pemilihan mikroorganisma yang bagus dengan toleransi terhadap toksik lain adalah penting untuk meningkatkan prestasi pemulihan persekitaran. Kajian ini menilai potensi bakteria *Rhodococcus* tempatan untuk mengurai fenol, iaitu hidrokarbon oksigen, yang merupakan salah satu daripada bahan cemar berbahaya kerana kesan toksik dan karsinogeniknya. Sepuluh strain *Rhodococcus* spp. dipencilkan dari Semenanjung Malaysia mampu tumbuh dalam medium yang mengandungi 0.5 gL^{-1} fenol. 1500 bp gen fenol hydroxylase telah diamplifikasi dari lapan strain sebagai penanda molekul. Satu strain, *Rhodococcus* sp. NAM 81 yang telah dipilih sebagai strain yang paling efektif menguraikan 0.5 gL^{-1} fenol dalam masa 24 jam. Keupayaan biodegradasi *Rhodococcus* sp. NAM 81 terjejas dengan kehadiran unsur surih dalam medium. Sebagai permulaan, parameter yang membantu biodegradasi dan pertumbuhan *Rhodococcus* sp. NAM 81 telah dioptimumkan menggunakan satu faktor pada satu masa. Pertumbuhan sel tertinggi dan degradasi fenol adalah optimum pada (30°C , pH 7.5). Ammonium sulfat 0.4 gL^{-1} , glycine 0.3 gL^{-1} dan 0.1 gL^{-1} NaCl diperlukan untuk meningkatkan pertumbuhan sel. Selain daripada fenol, strain ini juga mampu menggunakan 2,4-dinitrophenol, toluena, naftalena, diesel, asetonitril, gliserol dan sisa minyak memasak sebagai sumber karbon. Namun, kebolehan *Rhodococcus* sp. NAM 81 direncat dengan kehadiran logam berat di dalam medium yang mengandungi 1 mgL^{-1} Ag^+ , Cu^{2+} , Cr^{2+} , Cd^{2+} , Zn^{2+} and Hg^{2+} . Kaedah statistik melalui rekabentuk faktor fraksi (FFD) dan pengkaedahan tindakbalas permukaan (RSM) meningkatkan keupayaan biodegradasi fenol dengan pH, kepekatan fenol dan NaCl sebagai parameter penting yang disahkan melalui teori dan data eksperimen. RSM

telah memperbaiki proses dengan 1.2 kali ganda bagi degradasi fenol dan 1.3 kali ganda bagi pertumbuhan sel. Kajian tentang penggunaan sel sekat gerak dalam biodegradasi fenol bermula dengan penilaian matriks yang sesuai merangkumi gam gellan, kalsium alginat, agarose, agar-agar dan polyacrylamide. Gam gellan didapati matriks yang sesuai berbanding dengan matriks-matriks lain. Maksimum degradasi fenol dicapai pada kepekatan gam gellan sebanyak 0.75 %, saiz manik 3 mm dengan bilangan 300 biji dalam 100 ml media. Kedua-dua sel bebas dan sel sekat gerak mengurai pada kadar yang sama pada kepekatan fenol 100 mgL^{-1} , namun pada kepekatan yang tinggi, sel sekat gerak sahaja mengurai pada kadar yang tinggi. Fenol terurai sepenuhnya dalam masa 108, 216, dan 240 jam dalam kepekatan fenol masing-masing 1100, 1500 dan 1900 mgL^{-1} , manakala sel bebas mengambil masa 240 jam untuk mengurai sepenuhnya 1100 mgL^{-1} fenol dan tidak berupaya mengurai sepenuhnya fenol pada kepekatan yang tinggi. Secara keseluruhan, kadar degradasi fenol oleh sel sekat gerak dan sel bebas menurun selari dengan peningkatan kepekatan fenol. Logam berat dan perencat respirasi memberikan kesan yang rendah pada penguraian fenol oleh sel tersekat-gerak berbanding sel bebas. Sel tersekat-gerak boleh digunakan berulang kali selama 50 kitaran 18 jam dan stabil dalam penyimpanan pada 4°C selama 28 hari. Kajian tentang teknik untuk memecahkan sel bagi mengeluarkan enzim, protein dan DNA daripada sel *Rhodococcus* menunjukkan pemecahan menggunakan nitrogen cecair dalam masa 20 minit adalah kaedah terbaik. Bakteria ini menggunakan tapak jalan ortho untuk menguraikan fenol yang telah ditentukan menggunakan pendekatan biokimia dan tindak balas berantai polimerase. Gen untuk fenol hydroxylase, iaitu enzim yang memungkinkan penukaran fenol kepada catechol telah diklon, dirembes serta dituliskan daripada *Rhodococcus* sp. NAM 81. Gel SDS-PAGE menghasilkan jalur tunggal dengan berat molekul $\sim 60 \text{ kDa}$. Potensi sel rehat bagi *Rhodococcus* sp. NAM 81 sebagai alternatif kepada penggunaan sel bebas dan tersekat gerak untuk biodegradasi fenol dalam pencemar cecair juga telah diuji. Keputusan daripada kajian ini menunjukkan bakteria *Rhodococcus* sp. NAM 81 mempunyai potensi yang baik yang boleh diaplikasikan dalam proses biopemulihan sisa mengandungi fenol terutamanya menggunakan sel tersekat-gerak.

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Norazah Mohamad Nawawi, 2016



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	i
ABSTRAK	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
APPROVAL	vii
DECLARATION	ix
LIST OF TABLES	xvii
LIST OF FIGURES	xix
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	xxii
 CHAPTER	
1 GENERAL INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Research background	1
1.2 Statement of problem	1
1.3 Significance of study	2
1.4 Research objectives and research approach	2
 2 LITERATURE REVIEW	 4
2.1 Environmental technology	4
2.2 An overview of pollution	4
2.3 Remediation technologies	5
2.3.1 Bioremediation	5
2.4 Xenobiotics	7
2.5 Phenol	7
2.5.1 Sources of phenol	8
2.5.2 Hazard of phenol	10
2.5.3 Release of phenol into the environment	10
2.6 Organic and xenobiotic waste in Malaysia	12
2.7 Phenol management method	13
2.7.1 Microbial degradation of phenol	13
2.7.2 Phenol-degrading microorganisms	14
2.7.2.1 Phenol-degrading mold	15
2.7.2.2 Phenol-degrading yeast	16
2.7.2.3 Phenol-degrading algae	18
2.7.2.4 Phenol-degrading bacteria	18
2.7.2.4.1 Phenol-degrading bacteria from phenol and hydrocarbon-related industries and impacted areas	19
2.7.2.4.2 Phenol-degrading bacteria from chemical-related industries	21
2.7.2.4.3 Phenol-degrading bacteria from agricultural-related industries	22
2.7.2.4.4 Phenol-degrading bacteria from pristine and uncontaminated area	23

2.7.2.4.5	Phenol-degrading extremophilic bacteria	24
2.8	Actinomycete in bioremediation	27
2.8.1	Characteristics of <i>Rhodococcus</i>	28
2.8.2	Phenol-degrading <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp.	29
2.9	Aerobic biodegradation of phenol	30
2.10	Phenol degradation pathway	31
2.11	Application of immobilized cells for phenol degradation	33
2.12	Concluding remarks	34
3	MATERIALS AND METHODS	35
3.1	Experimental design	35
3.2	Chemicals	39
3.3	Microorganism	39
3.3.1	Preparation of inoculums	39
3.4	Microbiological media	40
3.4.1	Luria-Bertani medium	41
3.4.2	Nutrient agar and broth	41
3.4.3	Minimal salt medium (MSM)	41
3.5	Oligonucleotides	41
3.6	Isolation of genomic DNA	43
3.7	Isolation of plasmid DNA	43
3.8	Quantification of nucleic acids	43
3.9	Electrophoresis	44
3.10	Polymerase chain reaction	44
3.10.1	Standard PCR	44
3.10.2	Colony PCR	44
3.11	Purification of reaction products	44
3.12	Sequence analysis	45
3.13	Analytical procedures	45
3.14	Cell concentration	45
3.15	Determination of phenol concentration	45
3.16	Intracellular enzyme assay	46
3.16.1	Preparation of cell extraction	46
3.16.2	Protein determination	46
3.17	Statistical analysis	46
4	SCREENING AND CHARACTERIZATION OF PHENOL DEGRADING <i>Rhodococcus</i> BACTERIA	47
4.1	Introduction	47
4.2	Materials and methods	47
4.2.1	Chemicals and microorganism	47
4.2.2	Screening of phenol-degrading <i>Rhodococcus</i>	48
4.2.3	Detection of phenol hydroxylase gene	48
4.2.4	Effects of different medium composition on phenol degradation	48
4.2.5	Physio-chemical optimization for optimum growth and enhanced phenol degradation	49
4.2.6	Analytical procedures	50
4.2.6.1	Cell concentration	50

	4.2.6.2	Phenol concentration	50
	4.2.6.3	Statistical analysis	50
4.3		Result and discussion	50
	4.3.1	Screening of phenol degrading <i>Rhodococcus</i> spp.	50
	4.3.2	Effects of medium composition on percentage of phenol degradation and growth of <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81	54
	4.3.3	Optimization of culture conditions for the optimum growth and phenol degradation of <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81	56
	4.3.3.1	Effects of temperature	56
	4.3.3.2	Effects of initial pH	58
	4.3.3.3	Effect of nitrogen sources and the concentration of nitrogen sources	59
	4.3.3.4	Effects of salinity	61
	4.3.4	Effect of phenol concentration	62
	4.3.5	Effects of heavy metal	67
	4.3.6	Effects of Tween 80	69
	4.3.7	Utilisation of additional carbon source	69
4.4		Conclusion	71
5		STATISTICAL OPTIMIZATION FOR IMPROVEMENT OF PHENOL DEGRADATION BY <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81	73
	5.1	Introduction	73
	5.2	Materials and methods	74
	5.2.1	Chemicals	74
	5.2.2	Microorganism and inoculums preparation	74
	5.2.3	Phenol biodegradation experiments	74
	5.2.4	Analytical procedures	75
	5.2.5	Experimental design and data analysis for optimisation of phenol degradation and cell growth	75
	5.2.6	Screening of significant physico-chemical determinants by FFD	75
	5.2.7	Optimization of key determinants by RSM	75
	5.2.8	Statistical analysis and modeling	76
	5.2.9	Validation of the experimental model	77
	5.3	Results and discussion	77
	5.3.1	Screening of important variables using FFD	77
	5.3.2	Optimization of the key determinants by CCD for phenol degradation	79
	5.3.3	Response surface plotting for the optimization of biodegradation of phenol by <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81	84
	5.3.4	Response surface plotting for optimising the growth of <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81	86
	5.3.5	Verification of experiments	89
5.4		Conclusion	90

6	PHENOL DEGRADATION BY IMMOBILIZED <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81	91
6.1	Introduction	91
6.2	Materials and methods	92
6.2.1	Chemicals	92
6.2.2	Microorganism and Inoculum Preparation	92
6.2.3	Cultivation and phenol biodegradation experiments	92
6.2.4	Preparation of immobilized cells	92
6.2.4.1	Gellan gum	92
6.2.4.2	Agarose	93
6.2.4.3	Calcium alginate	93
6.2.4.4	Agar	93
6.2.4.5	Polyacrylamide	93
6.2.5	Screening of different matrices for immobilization of <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81 for phenol degradation	94
6.2.6	Optimization of immobilized condition	94
6.2.7	Cell leakage	94
6.2.8	Comparison of phenol degradation between free and immobilized cells	94
6.2.9	Reusability of immobilized cells	94
6.2.10	Analytical procedures	95
6.2.11	Statistical analysis	95
6.2.12	Scanning electron microscope	95
6.3	Results and discussion	95
6.3.1	Phenol degradation by immobilized cells in different entrapment matrix	95
6.3.2	Optimization conditions for immobilized cells	97
6.3.2.1	Effects of matrix component concentration	97
6.3.2.2	Effects of crosslinker concentration	98
6.3.2.3	Effect of bead size	99
6.3.2.4	Effect of initial cell loading	100
6.3.2.5	Effect of beads number	101
6.3.3	Effect of initial phenol concentration on phenol degradation by freely suspended and immobilized cells	102
6.3.4	Effect of heavy metals on phenol degradation by freely suspended and immobilized cells	104
6.3.5	Effect of respiratory inhibitors on phenol degradation by freely suspended and immobilized cells	106
6.3.6	Reusability of immobilized beads	108
6.3.7	Storage stability of <i>Rhodococcal</i> cells and gellan gum encapsulated beads with phenol degradation activity	111
6.3.8	Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) of immobilized cells	111
6.4	Conclusion	112

7	CHARACTERIZATION OF PHENOL DEGRADING ENZYMES	114
7.1	Introduction	114
7.2	Materials and methods	115
7.2.1	Chemicals	115
7.2.2	Microorganism and inoculum preparation	115
7.2.3	Intracellular quantification using different mechanical disruption methods	115
7.2.3.1	Grinding under liquid nitrogen	115
7.2.3.2	Glass bead milling	115
7.2.3.3	Sonication	116
7.2.3.4	Homogenisation	116
7.2.4	Metabolic pathway determination	116
7.2.4.1	Metabolic pathway determination using biochemical analysis	116
7.2.4.1.1	Phenol hydroxylase assay	116
7.2.4.1.2	Catechol 1,2 dioxygenase assay	116
7.2.4.1.3	Catechol 2,3-oxygenase assay	117
7.2.4.1.4	Test tube analysis	117
7.2.4.1.5	Spray plate method	117
7.2.4.1.6	Spot test for detection of catechol 2,3 dioxygenase activity	117
7.2.4.2	PCR amplification of catechol 1,2-dioxygenase and catechol 2,3-dioxygenase gene	117
7.2.5	Cloning, expression and characterization of phenol hydroxylase	118
7.2.5.1	Amplification of phenol hydroxylase gene	118
7.2.5.2	Cloning and sequencing of phenol hydroxylase gene	118
7.2.5.3	Preparation of glycerol stock	120
7.2.5.4	Expression of phenol hydroxylase in <i>E.coli</i>	120
7.2.5.5	Purification of phenol hydroxylase	120
7.2.6	Sodium Dodecyl Sulphate Polyacrylamide Gel Electrophoresis (SDS-PAGE)	121
7.2.7	Analysis of protein by mass spectrometry	122
7.3	Results and discussion	122
7.3.1	Determination of the optimum disruption methods to extract intracellular metabolite from <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81	122
7.3.2	Determination of phenol metabolic pathway in <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81	127
7.3.3	Cloning, expression and characterization of phenol hydroxylase	132
7.3.3.1	Amplification of phenol hydroxylase gene by PCR	133
7.3.3.2	Cloning of phenol hydroxylase gene in vector pQE9	135

	7.3.3.3	Screening using PCR and restriction enzyme digestion	136
	7.3.3.4	Expression and purification of phenol hydroxylase gene	137
	7.3.3.5	Catalytic activity of His ₆ PheA1	146
	7.4	Conclusion	149
8		Biological Removal of Phenol From Simulated Wastewater Using RESTING CELLS OF <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81	150
	8.1	Introduction	150
	8.2	Materials and Methods	150
	8.2.1	Preparation of synthetic wastewater	150
	8.2.2	Preparation of seed culture of <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81	150
	8.2.3	Determination of growth curve	151
	8.2.4	Production of resting cells	151
	8.2.5	Effect of cells suspension media and cells concentration	151
	8.2.6	Determination of factor for phenol degradation by resting cells	151
	8.2.7	Thermostability and reusability of resting cells	151
	8.2.8	Comparison between immobilized, growing and resting cells in phenol degradation at different phenol concentration	152
	8.2.9	Analytical procedures	152
	8.3	Results and Discussion	152
	8.3.1	Growth curve of <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81	152
	8.3.2	Effect of different medium for the production of resting cells	154
	8.3.3	Effect of cells suspension media and cells concentration on phenol degradation	155
	8.3.4	Determination of factor for phenol degradation by resting cells	157
	8.3.5	Thermostability and reusability of resting cells of <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81	159
	8.3.6	Comparison between immobilized, growing and resting cells in phenol degradation at different phenol concentration	160
	8.4	Conclusion	161
9		CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH	162
	9.1	Conclusion	162
	9.2	Recommendation for future study	164
		REFERENCES	166
		APPENDICES	210
		BIODATA OF STUDENT	216
		LIST OF PUBLICATIONS	217

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
2.1 Sources of phenols and the other related aromatic compounds in wastewater	9
2.2 Levels of phenol in wastewater of some selected industries	11
2.3 Phenol management method	13
2.4 List of molds that are capable to degrade phenol	15
2.5 List of phenol-degrading yeast	18
2.6 List of bacteria that are capable to degrade phenol	25
2.7 Source of origin for phenol degrading <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp.	29
3.1 Bacterial strain used in this work	40
3.2 Oligonucleotides used this study	42
4.1 Growth of phenol-degrading <i>Rhodococcus</i> spp. on MSM containing 0.5gL ⁻¹ phenol within 10 days of incubation at 30 °C	51
4.2 Effect of different phenol concentration on the phenol degradation by eight <i>Rhodococcus</i> spp. in five days incubation	53
4.3 Carbon utilization profile of <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81	70
5.1 Experimental range and levels of the independent variables used in fractional factorial design in terms of actual and coded units	75
5.2 Experimental range and levels of the independent variables used in RSM in terms of actual and coded units	76
5.3 Half FFD matrix for 6 independent variables for phenol degradation by <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. strain NAM 81	78
5.4 Analysis of variance (ANOVA) for fitted second-order polynomial model as per half FFD	79
5.5 Analysis of variance (ANOVA) for phenol degradation and cell growth for response surface model	80
5.6 The predicted and experiment value of phenol degradation and cell growth of <i>Rhodococcus</i> NAM 81 in the matrix of central composite design	83

5.7	Validation of the predicted and experimental cultivation variable	89
6.1	Percentage of phenol degradation and amount of cell leakage using various immobilization matrices	96
6.2	Effect of initial phenol concentration on phenol degradation ability of immobilized and free suspended cells of <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81 within 12 days of cultivation period	103
6.3	Effect of storage stability on percentage of phenol degradation by immobilized and free cells	111
7.1	Components of digestion mixture	119
7.2	Components of ligation mixture	119
7.3	Analysis of total protein content and specific enzyme activity	123
7.4	Nucleic acid yield obtained by four disruption methods from <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp.	126
7.5	Protein expression at different temperature	141
7.6	Purification table of recombinant phenol hydroxylase using His-trap HP IMAC purification column	145
8.1	Physical factors on phenol degradation by resting cells of <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81	158
8.2	Thermostability of resting cells of <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81	160

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure		Page
2.1	Schematic diagram on biological treatment from three distinct areas of biocatalyst	6
2.2	Chemical structure of phenol	8
2.3	Phenol metabolic pathway	32
3.1	Experimental design of phenol biodegradation by <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp.	36
4.1	Amplification of phenol hydroxylase gene for general detection and as the molecular marker of phenol degrading bacteria	52
4.2	Comparison of medium on the growth profile (A) and phenol degradation (B) of <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81	55
4.3	Effect of temperature on the growth profile and phenol degradation of <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81	57
4.4	Effect of initial pH of MSM containing 0.5 gL ⁻¹ on the growth profile and phenol degradation of <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81	59
4.5	Effect of nitrogen sources on the growth profile and phenol degradation of <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81	60
4.6	Effect of ammonium sulphate and glycine concentration on bacterial growth and percentage of phenol degradation	61
4.7	Effect of NaCl concentration on the growth profile and phenol degradation of <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81	62
4.8	Effect of phenol concentration on the growth profile and phenol degradation of <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81	66
4.9	Effect of metal ions on the growth profile and phenol degradation of <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81	68
4.10	Effect of Tween 80 on growth and phenol degradation ability of <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81	69
5.1	Three dimensional response surface plot for phenol degradation with respect to the interactive effects of pH and phenol concentration (A); phenol concentration and NaCl concentration (B) and the interaction of phenol concentration and incubation time (C)	86

5.2	Three dimensional response surface plotted for cell growth with respect to the interactive effects of pH and phenol concentration (A); phenol concentration and NaCl concentration (B) and phenol concentration and incubation time (C)	88
6.1	Effect of different percentage of gellan gum on phenol degradation by immobilized <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. Strain NAM 81	98
6.2	Effects of concentration of calcium chloride on phenol degradation by immobilized <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. Strain NAM 81	99
6.3	Effects of beads size on phenol degradation by immobilized <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. strain NAM 81	100
6.4	Effect of cell concentration on phenol degradation by immobilized <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. strain NAM 81	101
6.5	Effect of beads number on phenol degradation by immobilized <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. strain NAM 81	102
6.6	Effect of heavy metals on phenol degradation by immobilized (black) and free cells (white) of <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. strain NAM 81	105
6.7	Effect of respiratory inhibitors on phenol degradation towards immobilized and free cells of <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. strain NAM 81	107
6.8	Effect of 3 mM respiratory inhibitors on phenol degradation towards immobilized and free cell of <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. strain NAM 81	108
6.9	Repeated usage of immobilized <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. strain NAM 81 in the initial phenol concentration of 500 mgL ⁻¹ for cycle 41-54	110
6.10	Scanning electron microscope of blank gellan gum bead (a) and cells immobilized in gellan gum bead (b) after degrading phenol 18hours under optimum condition	112
7.1	Protein extraction assessments using various mechanical disruptions	124
7.2	Analysis of phenol hydroxylase using different grinding time under liquid nitrogen	125
7.3	Metabolism of phenol-degrading pathways by <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. strain NAM 81	128
7.4	Metabolic pathway analysis of <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81 using test tube method	129

7.5	Metabolic pathway analysis of <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81 using spray method	130
7.6	Metabolic pathway analysis of <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81 using spot test method	130
7.7	The amplification of catechol 1,2 dioxygenase gene on an agarose gel	132
7.8	PCR amplification product of phenol hydroxylase gene from the genomic DNA of <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81 with different annealing temperatures	134
7.9	Nucleotide sequence of phenol hydroxylase gene in plasmid pQE9	138
7.10	SDS-PAGE of <i>Escherichia coli</i> XL 10 Gold harboring pQE9-phehyd1	139
7.11	Effect of IPTG induction on growth of <i>E.coli</i> XL 10 Gold	140
7.12	Time course study of protein expression induced at 37 °C	143
7.13	The purified His ₆ Phe1NAM 81 on SDS-PAGE	145
7.14	Catalytic activity of His ₆ Phe1Hyd1 in <i>E. coli</i> XL10 Gold	147
7.15	The chromatogram of LC-MS	148
8.1	Growth curve of <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81	153
8.2	Phenol degradation by resting cells of <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81	155
8.3	Phenol degradation by resting cells of <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81 resuspend in different solution	156
8.4	Phenol degradation in synthetic wastewater containing 0.5 gL ⁻¹ phenol for 24 hours at 30 °C by various cell concentration of resting cells of <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. NAM 81	157
8.5	Percentage of phenol degradation by free, resting and immobilize <i>Rhodococcus</i> cells at diverse phenol concentration in 24 hours	161

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abs	Absorbance
CCD	Central composite design
Cd	Cadmium
cm	Centimetre
Cr	Chromium
Co	Cobalt
Cu	Copper
°C	Degree celcius
dH ₂ O	Distilled water
Da	Dalton
EDTA	Ethylene diamine tetra acetic acid
FFD	Fractional factorial design
G	Gram
gL ⁻¹	Gram per litre
>	Greater than
h	Hour
Fe	Iron
kDa	Kilo dalton
kb	Kilo base
kg	Kilogram
<	Less than
L	Liter
Hg	Mercury
mL	Mililiter

mgL ⁻¹	Miligram per litre
mM	Milimolar
µgL ⁻¹	Microgram per litre
µM	Micromolar
µL	Microlitre
min	Minute
MW	Molecular weight
MSM	Minimal salt medium
M	Molar
µm	Micrometer
h ⁻¹	Per hour
L ⁻¹	Per liter
%	Percent
<i>et al</i>	and friends
NA	Nutrient agar
OD	Optical density
PAGE	Polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis
RPM	Rotation per minute
RSM	Response surface method
SDS	Sodium dodecyl sulphate
SEM	Scanning electron microscope

CHAPTER 1

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research background

Malaysia as a modern Islamic country has made a progressive living and operating environment in a stable political and consistent economic growth from various industries. Industrializations will lead to numerous environmental problems that is harmful to ecosystems and communities (Hsu *et al.*, 2014). In the Fourth Regional 3R Forum in Asia, it has been reported that about 3,281,569.21 metric tonnes of scheduled wastes have been generated in Malaysia compared to 3,087,496.84 metric tonnes (6.29%) in 2010. Besides dross, slag, clinker, ash, gypsum, mineral sludge and heavy metals sludge, about 7,904.42 metric tonnes of phenol have been also released, which contributes to about 0.49% of the total waste as the main categories of waste generated in the country (DOE, 2011).

Phenol (C_6H_5OH) is toxic and relatively recalcitrant to biological degradation process (Li *et al.*, 2015; ATSDR, 2014). Phenol occurs naturally and can also originate from industrial effluents such as pharmaceutical, food industries, oil refineries and coal conversion processes (Yemendzhiev *et al.*, 2008; Passos *et al.*, 2010; Pradeep *et al.*, 2014; Aida and Hanan, 2014). Phenol and phenolic compounds are also released into the wastewater from steel industries, petrochemicals, polymeric resins and dye manufacturing units. Phenol is important as raw materials and additives for industrial purposes, especially in laboratory processes, chemical industry, chemical engineering, wood and plastics processing. Phenol and phenolics are soluble in water; hence causing the carbolic odour in water. It disturbs the ecological balance since it is toxic to aquatic flora and fauna (Michalowicz and Duda, 2007; Clodio *et al.*, 2009; Soudi and Kolahchi, 2011). It could also diffuse across a cell's membrane of an organism. Studies showed that constant administration of phenol by animals could cause pathological changes (ATSDR, 1998). Phenol discharge towards the water body will endangers aquatic life, even at concentration of between 500 and 2500 mgL^{-1} (Yan *et al.*, 2005).

1.2 Statement of problem

Based on the toxicity and risks to organism and environment, phenol removal is crucial for lowering the concentration of phenol below the regulatory limit that requires appropriate treatment of waste containing phenol before being discharged to the nature. A report prepared by the United States Government Accountability Office mentioned that their agencies have spent almost US\$30 billion from 1986 to 2008 for all environmental cleanup and restoration activities (GAO, 2010). Physical, chemical and biological methods have been widely applied to remove contaminants from the polluted area. Yet, among the techniques, biological removal offers the cheapest and safest method through bioremediation (Bijay *et al.*, 2012). It is an ideal solution for pollution abatement nowadays being a green technology that uses biological systems

for the treatment of contaminants (Desai *et al.*, 2010). Biological approach is a method of choice as it is low in cost and offers complete mineralisation compared to other methods (Shweta and Dhandayuthapani, 2013; Agarry *et al.*, 2008). Even though this recent technology is using a multidisciplinary approach, its central thrust depends on microbiology, especially with the application of bacteria in phenol biodegradation (Gami *et al.*, 2014; Aysha and Mumtaj, 2014; Shah, 2014; Krastanov *et al.*, 2013).

1.3 Significance of study

Realising the importance of using microorganisms as a potential remediation system for xenobiotic compounds in waste, the Malaysian Government, through the Malaysia Genome Institute (MGI) established a project on the isolation of such microbes for industrial and environmental applications. The study on the ecology of marine and terrestrial microbes around Peninsular Malaysia is in progress with a number of microorganisms from different ecological niches that have been isolated. A group of microorganisms that have been chosen for further research is the mycolic acid-containing actinomycetes. The broad metabolic diversity of the mycolic acid-containing actinomycetes have attracted the pharmaceutical, environmental, chemical and energy industries. The discovery of novel xenobiotics-degrading metabolic capability and bioactive compounds from this group of microbes is far from exhausted (Davies and Davies 2010; Arenskotter *et al.*, 2004). The rhodococci is a group of aerobic, non-motile actinomycetes (Larkin *et al.*, 2005). *Rhodococci* degrade an extensive array of recalcitrant pollutants that makes them promising candidates to be used in bioremediation. In addition, there are numerous other industrial applications where rhodococci, or their gene products, are actually being used or are in the pipeline. The economic significance of *Rhodococcus* species are being widely recognised. In Malaysia, informations available on the potential role of *Rhodococcus* spp. especially in phenol detoxification is slowly being discovered.

Environmental-friendly technologies are gaining increasing prominence as a safe remediation technique for phenol and phenolics pollution (Agrawal and Shahi, 2015; Dash *et al.*, 2009). In this study, the evaluation of various locally isolated *Rhodococci* will broaden the reservoir of existing phenol-degrading microbial populations that are competent in phenol degradation especially in a temperate climate.

1.4 Research objectives and research approach

Keeping all these points in view, the overall aim of this project was to develop an approach for phenol biodegradation performed by locally-isolated microorganism. The hypothesis for this research were; (a) the locally isolated *Rhodococcus* is able to tolerate higher concentration of phenol (b) the immobilized *Rhodococcus* sp. offer better degradation rate and (c) the enzymes and gene encoded for the enzymes could be isolated and characterized. In view of this, the following objectives are outlined:

1. To screen and characterize phenol-degrading *Rhodococcus*
2. To optimize the degradation of phenol by the selected phenol-degrading *Rhodococcus* using one factor at a time (OFAT) approach and response surface methodology (RSM) by free and immobilized cells.
3. To immobilize the phenol-degrading *Rhodococcus* to improve biodegradation efficiency.
4. To determine the mechanism of phenol degradation by characterization of the phenol-degrading enzymes
5. To evaluate the potential of resting cells for phenol degradation



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