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Greenhouse Effect and Global Warming

Environmental Science Student Laboratory Kit

Introduction

What is the greenhouse effect? How does the amount of greenhouse gas in the atmosphere affect the temperature of the Earth? Where are the increased amounts of greenhouse gas originating from? Perform the following activities to gain a better understanding of the greenhouse effect and global warming.

Concepts

- Greenhouse effect
- Global warming
- Greenhouse gases

Background

Carbon dioxide, CO_2, is a colorless gas that is present in our atmosphere due to natural and man-made sources. Carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in the upper atmosphere, such as water vapor, ozone, methane, nitrous oxide and chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) absorb and trap heat energy and thus act like a global blanket. The sun warms the surface of the Earth and the heat normally radiates back out into space. Because low levels of $CO_2(g)$ are naturally present in the Earth's atmosphere, a certain amount of this blanket effect is normal. However, the widespread combustion of fossil fuels and increased deforestatio[illegible] modern world has produced larger quantities of $CO_2(g)$, thus thickening the blanket. A majority of the heat energy ends up in our atmosphere. This phenomenon is known as the *greenhouse effect*. In this past century, the amount of $CO_2(g)$ in o[illegible] sphere has increased more than 20% and has reached a point where scientists are concerned that *global warming*—the increase of the Earth's temperature—is occurring.

In Part I of this activity, plastic bottles will be used to model the greenhouse effect and how a greenhouse traps heat energy. In a greenhouse, visible light (medium wavelength) and ultraviolet light (short wavelength) pass through the glass while infrared radiation (long wavelengths) are absorbed or reflected. The visible light and UV light from the Sun that pass through the glass are absorbed by dark-colored surfaces, such as plants and soil, inside the greenhouse. These dark-colored objects absorb the light energy and heat up. These dark objects inside the greenhouse then re-radiate energy from their surfaces. The re-radiated energy, however, is infrared (long wavelength) radiation and not the shorter wavelengths like those that entered the greenhouse. The longer wavelength radiation is absorbed or reflected back into the greenhouse from the glass as it tries to pass back out through the glass. Thus, the original short wave light rays have been transformed and "trapped" inside the greenhouse. The greenhouse thus acts as a one-way valve for infrared heat energy. The entire structure becomes a "heat trap."

In Part II of this activity, carbon dioxide gas from various sources will be collected and bubbled through an indicator solution to determine the relative amount of CO_2 emitted from each source. When carbon dioxide gas reacts with water, carbonic acid, H_2CO_3, is produced. Carbonic acid ionizes to give hydrogen (H^+) and bicarbonate ions (HCO_3^-). See Equation 1.

$$CO_2(g) + H_2O(l) \leftrightarrows H_2CO_3(aq) \leftrightarrows H^+(aq) + HCO_3^-(aq) \qquad \textit{Equation 1}$$

Hydrogen ions on the right side of the equation make the solution more acidic and lower the pH. The degree to which the pH changes is proportional to the amount of CO_2 that dissolves in the water. In Part II, a bromthymol blue indicator solution will be used to determine CO_2 concentration. Bromthymol blue is an acid–base indicator that is yellow at a pH of 6.0 or below and blue at a pH of 7.6 or higher.

Experiment Overview

In Part I of this activity, a bottle will be half-covered with black paper and then exposed to a light source. The air temperature inside this "greenhouse bottle" will be measured and compared to a normal bottle exposed to the same light source. In Part II of this activity, carbon dioxide gas from various sources will be collected and bubbled through indicator solution. The amount of base that must be added to return the solutions to their original color will be measured and compared.

Materials

Bromthymol blue solution, 0.04%, 5 mL
Sodium bicarbonate, $NaHCO_3$, 10 g
Sodium hydroxide solution, NaOH, 0.1 M, 5 mL
Vinegar, 100 mL
Water, tap
Balloon, pre-filled with automobile exhaust
Balloons, empty, 2
Bottles, soda, and caps, 2
Construction paper sheet, black
Containers and caps, plastic, 60-mL, 4
Lamp or other light source, with bulb 150 watts or higher
Permanent marker
Pipets, 3
Ruler
Scissors
Straws, 3
String, 6″ pieces, 3
Stopper, one-hole
Support stand
Tape (optional)
Thermometers, plastic-backed, 3
Twist ties, 2

Safety Precautions

The dilute sodium hydroxide solution used in this activity is irritating to skin and eyes. Avoid contact of all chemicals with eyes and skin. Wear chemical splash goggles, chemical-resistant gloves, and a chemical-resistant apron. Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water before leaving the laboratory. Follow all laboratory safety guidelines.

Procedure

Part I. Greenhouse Effect

1. Obtain two plastic soda bottles and caps, a sheet of black construction paper, scissors, clear tape, a ruler, three plastic-backed thermometers, three 6″ pieces of string, a support stand and a light source or lamp.
2. Tie a 6″ piece of string to the hole at the top of one of the thermometers.
3. Repeat step 2 with two additional 6″ pieces of string and two more thermometers.
4. Cut a 6″ × 6″ piece of black construction paper to fit over one-half of the outside surface of one of the bottles.
5. Tape the black construction paper on the outside of one of the bottles (see Figure 1).

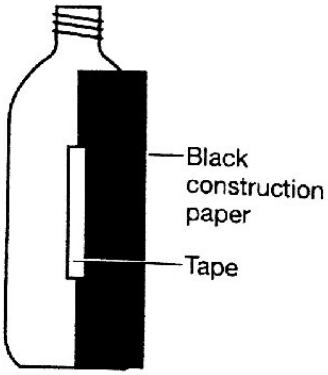

Figure 1. Black Construction Paper on Bottle

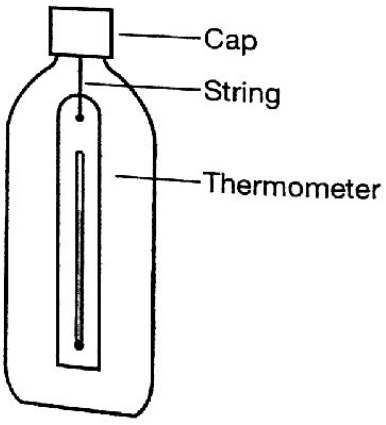

Figure 2. Thermometer in Bottle

6. Place a thermometer inside the neck of one of the bottles. Allow the string to hang over the neck of the bottle and screw on the cap. The thermometer should be suspended in the bottle (see Figure 2).
7. Repeat step 6 using another thermometer and a second plastic bottle.

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8. Set up the activity as illustrated in Figure 3. Use a ring stand to position a third thermometer at 15 cm away from the lamp and the same height from the table top.

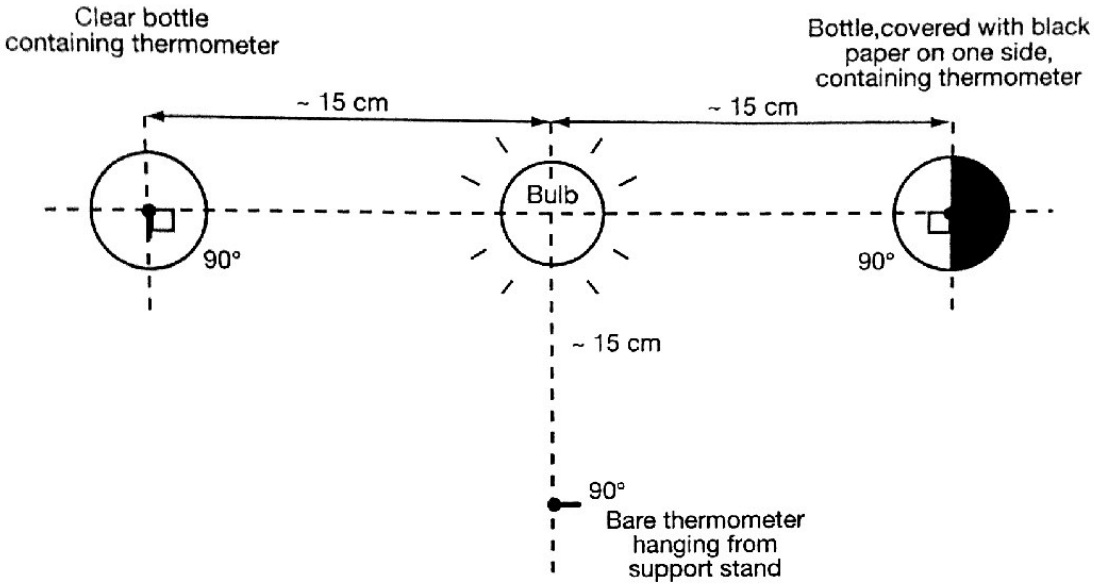

Figure 3. Top View of Activity Setup

9. Record the temperature for each of the three thermometers before the light is turned on.
10. Turn on the light and record the temperature of each thermometer every five minutes for 20 minutes.
11. Record all temperature readings in the data table.

Part II. Sources and Levels of Greenhouse Gas

12. Obtain four 60-mL plastic containers and caps, a plastic soda bottle, 5 mL of bromthymol blue solution, 5 mL of 0.1 M sodium hydroxide, 30 g (5 teaspoons) of sodium bicarbonate, 100 mL of vinegar, a one-hole stopper, three pipets, two empty balloons, a balloon filled with automobile exhaust, three straws, a permanent marker, scissors, and two twist ties.
13. Blow up one of the empty balloons with your breath. Fill the balloon until it is the size of the prefilled automobile exhaust balloon. Use a twist tie to close the neck of the balloon once it has been inflated. Label the balloon "Breath" with a permanent marker.
14. Place approximately 30 g (6 teaspoons) of sodium bicarbonate into the plastic soda bottle.
15. Cut a pipet approximately 2″ from the end of the tip. Place the tip of this pipet into a one-hole rubber stopper (see Figure 4).

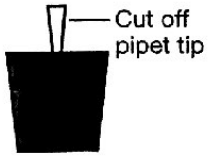

Figure 4. Pipet Tip in Stopper

16. Place the neck of the final empty air balloon over the free end of the pipet as shown in Figure 5. Wrap the neck of the balloon around the pipet. Fold over and pinch the excess portion of the neck of the balloon around the pipet with your thumb and first two fingers.

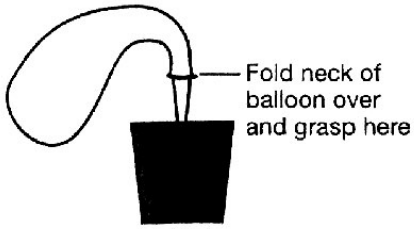

Figure 5. Neck of Balloon around Pipet

17. Pour approximately 100 mL of vinegar into the plastic bottle and quickly place the one-hole stopper into the mouth of the plastic bottle. The balloon will quickly inflate with carbon dioxide gas.
18. Allow the balloon to inflate to the size of the other two already-filled balloons. Twist the neck of the balloon to close it and secure it with a twist tie. Label the balloon "CO_2" with a permanent marker.
19. Add 10 mL of tap water to each of four 60-mL plastic containers.
20. Using a pipet, add 10 drops of bromthymol blue solution to each 60-mL container. Record the initial color of the solution for each container bottle in the data table.
21. Obtain the "breath" balloon. Place a straw into the neck of the balloon. Fold over and pinch the excess portion of the neck of the balloon around the straw with your thumb and first two fingers (see Figure 6). Tape the neck of the balloon to the straw to obtain a tight seal, if necessary.

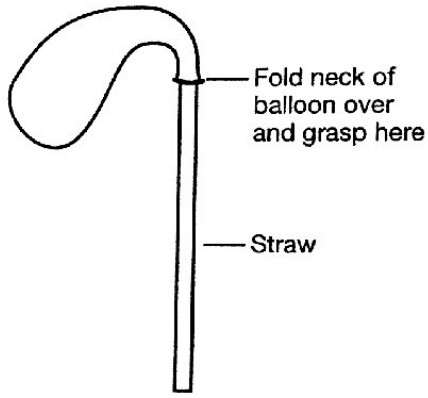

Figure 6. Neck of Balloon around Straw

22. Place the other end of the straw into the bromthymol blue solution in the bottom of one of the 60-mL containers.
23. Untwist the twist tie and bubble the air from the balloon through the straw and into the bromthymol blue solution until the balloon has deflated.
24. Place the cap on this container and record the color of the solution in the data table.
25. Repeat steps 21–24 for the balloon filled with automobile exhaust and the balloon filled with carbon dioxide. Record the color of the solutions in each 60-mL container in the data table.
26. Perform step 27 for any of the bottles that had solutions that underwent a color change.
27. Uncap the first container. Using a clean Beral-type pipet, add 0.1 M sodium hydroxide solution drop-by-drop to the indicator solution, swirling the solution with each added drop. Count the number of drops required for the indicator to change back to its original color. *Note:* Use the fourth small container with the original bromthymol blue solution as the color control. Wait a minute or two before recording the final drop counts as the color may revert slightly.
28. Record the number of drops and observations in the data table.
29. Answer the *Post-Lab Questions*.

Disposal

Consult your instructor for appropriate disposal procedures.

Name: _____

Greenhouse Effect and Global Warming Worksheet

Data Tables

Part I. Greenhouse Effect

All temperatures in degrees C

Time (min)	Open	Clear Bottle	Bottle with Construction Paper
0			
5			
10			
15			
20			

Part II. Sources and Levels of Greenhouse Gas

Source of CO_2	Initial Solution Color	Color after Adding Gas	Number of Drops of NaOH Required
Breath			
Automobile Exhaust			
CO_2			

Post-Lab Questions

1. Compare and contrast the temperature results obtained for the different thermometer setups in Part I.

2. Define the greenhouse effect and global warming. Describe how they are related.

3. How do the temperature results observed for the different bottles in Part I relate to the greenhouse effect?

4. What additional experiments could be performed using the basic setup in Part I to further investigate the greenhouse effect?

5. Which indicator sample(s) in Part II revealed the presence of carbonic acid after the balloon gases were bubbled through them?

6. Compare the number of drops of NaOH required to return to the original control color for each solution. What do these results mean?

7. Which balloon sample contained the largest amount of CO_2? Which contained the least?

8. Describe possible sources of experimental error that may affect the results for Part II.

9. Name a few ways to decrease the amount of greenhouse gas that is released into the atmosphere.