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RAPID COMMUNICATION

# Fluorescein-*N*-Methylimidazole Conjugate as $Cu^{2+}$ Sensor in Mixed Aqueous Media Through Electron Transfer

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**Abstract** A new highly selective, chromogenic, and fluorogenic $Cu^{2+}$ chemosensor, fluorescein-*N*-methylimidazole conjugate **1**, and another fluorescein-*N*-imidazole conjugate **2** were synthesized and investigated by UV-visible and fluorescence spectroscopy. The sensing of $Cu^{2+}$ quenches the emission band of **1** at $\lambda_{max}$ = 525 nm, with an association constant ($K_a$ = 1.0 x $10^7$ $M^{-1}$) and a stoichiometry of 1:1 in a buffered $H_2O$: MeOH solution (4:1, pH = 7.4). The $Cu^{2+}$ detection limit for chemosensor **1** is 37 nM. The presence of the *N*-methyl group in **1** increased the $Cu^{2+}$ binding selectivity, resulting in a stronger binding constant and a broader pH working range (pH 5–10) in comparison to **2**. The fluorescence in **1** and **2** is caused by electron transfer phenomenon from the imidazole nitrogen to fluorescein, which is readily inhibited by $Cu^{2+}$ binding.

**Keywords** Fluorescent chemosensor · Copper ion-selective · Fluorescein-*N*-methylimidazole electron transfer

## Introduction

Fluorescent chemosensors are highly valuable as they provide an accurate detection of toxic heavy metal ions with high sensitivity and specificity. They are easily accessible at a lower cost, and offer a rapid tracking of analytes in biological, toxicological, and environmental samples [1, 2]. Copper is the third most essential element for living organisms after iron and zinc [3]. Its effects are diverse and far-ranging, as it serves as an essential cofactor for numerous redox enzymes involved in critical processes such as respiration (e.g., cytochrome c oxidase) [4], electron transfer/substrate oxidation and iron uptake (ceruloplasmin) [5], pigmentation (tyrosinase) [6], neurotransmitter synthesis and metabolism (dopamine β-hydroxylase, peptidylglycine), and handling of dietary amines (copper amine oxidases) [7]. However, unregulated overloading of copper from copper polluted water is linked to human genetic disorders (Menkes and Wilson's diseases) [8], neurodegenerative diseases (e.g. Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, prion, and Huntington's diseases as well as familial amyotrophic lateral sclerosis) [9–13], and metabolic disorders (e.g. obesity and diabetes) [14, 15]. Recently, copper has also been found to regulate cancers [16]. Owing to its widespread use in various industries, the $Cu^{2+}$ species is a significant environmental pollutant. The World Health Organization (WHO) has set the safe limit of copper in drinking water at 2 ppm (31.5 μM) [17]. Thus, the development of chemosensors for the selective analysis of $Cu^{2+}$ with high sensitivity, low detection limit, and quick response is in great demand [18]. Current methods for copper screening, which include atomic absorption spectrometry (AAS) [19], inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry (ICP-MS) [20], and inductively coupled plasma atomic emission spectrometry (ICP-AES) [21], total reflection X-Ray fluorescence (TXRF) spectrometry, and anodic stripping voltammetry (ASV) [22, 23], often require expensive and sophisticated instrumentation or complex sample preparation steps. On the other hand, $Cu^{2+}$ can also be detected using small molecular chemosensors based on rhodamine Schiff base [24], novel rhodamine hydrazine [25], pyridoxal moiety

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[26], as well as novel coumarin [27] and thiazole-derived groups [28, 29].

Among highly fluorescent dyes, xanthene-based rhodamine and fluorescein dyes have attracted considerable interests from chemists owing to their excellent photophysical properties [30]. The fluorescein structure is an ideal model for the construction of fluorescent chemosensors because of the easy of synthesis and functionalization [31], excitation and emission wavelengths in the visible region with a high fluorescence quantum yield [32–35], excellent biocompatibility, high molar extinction coefficient, and high photostability and water solubility [36, 37].

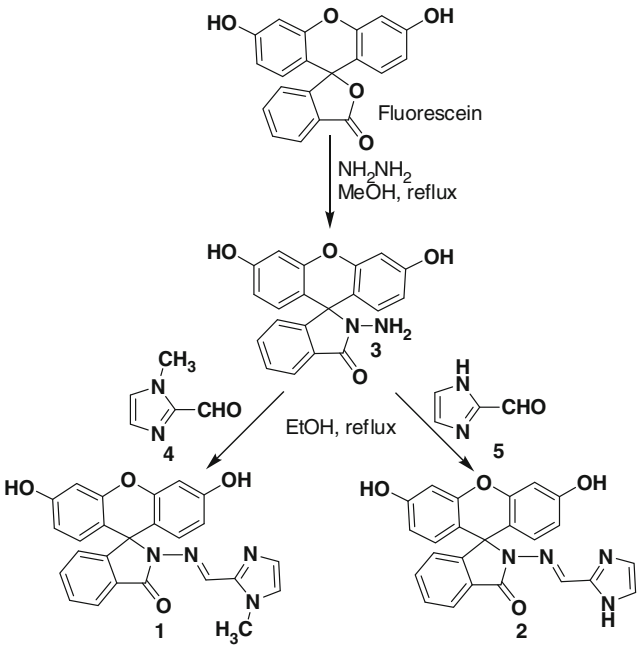
Imidazole is widely used as a building block in many fields such as medicine [38], biology [39], electronic and optical materials [40], ionic liquids [41], and chemosensors [42–45]. It is a π-electron-rich heteroaromatic molecule with electron density concentrated on the N-atoms. Moreover, imidazole shows excellent coordination properties toward metal ions [46], and various substituted imidazoles form complexes with many metal ions, in which the electrons are donated by the pyridinic N-atom. Imidazole and its functionalized derivatives have been applied in environmental monitoring, industrial process control, metalloneurochemistry, and biomedical diagnostics because of their bioactivities [42–46].

Schiff bases are well known as good metal ion ligands and they can be easily synthesized. Thus, Schiff base derivatives, incorporated with a fluorescent moiety as the signaling unit and imidazole as the binding unit, are appealing as optical sensing tools for metal ions [47–49]. However, there is a lack of precedence on the use of fluorescein-imidazole conjugate for metal ion sensing. Herein, we spectrophotometrically and spectrofluorometrically investigated a new Schiff base compound (**1**) (Scheme 1), consisting of fluorescein hydrazone and *N*-methylimidazole, as a chemosensor for metal ions. The fluorescein hydrazone and (NH)-imidazole conjugate (**2**) was also prepared to study the effect of the methyl group on metal binding selectivity. The reversible, highly selective chromogenic and fluorogenic responses of **1**, upon the addition of $Cu^{2+}$ in a mixed aqueous solution containing 4-(2-hydroxyethyl)-1-piperazineethanesulfonic acid (HEPES) buffer (10 mM, pH 7.4), and its binding characteristics (in competition with other cations) are reported.

## Experimental Section

### General Methods

Melting points were determined using a Thomas-Hoover capillary melting point apparatus and are uncorrected. $^{1}H$ and $^{13}C$ NMR spectra were recorded on a JEOL 500 MHz spectrometer using $Me_4Si$ as the internal standard. The HR-FAB mass was determined at the KBSI Daegu branch South Korea. UV–vis




**Scheme 1** Synthesis of **1** and **2**

absorption spectra were obtained using a Jasco V-670 spectrophotometer. Fluorescence spectra were measured using a Horiba, Fluorolog-3 fluorescence spectrophotometer, equipped with a xenon discharge lamp and 1 cm quartz cells with slit width 5 nm. All of the measurements were carried out at 298 K.

Analytical grade absolute ethanol and methanol were purchased from Merck. Deionized water (double distilled) was used throughout the experiment as the aqueous media. All other materials used for synthesis were purchased from Aldrich Chemical Co. and used without further purification. Compounds **3**, **4**, and **5** were prepared in accordance with the literature procedure [47–49]. The solutions of metal ions were prepared from their nitrate and chloride salts (analytical grade), and subsequently diluted to prepare working solutions. HEPES buffer solutions at different pH values were prepared using appropriate amounts of HEPES and KOH (all of analytical grade) under adjustment by a Mettler Toledo pH meter.

### Determination of Quantum Yield

The fluorescence quantum yields were determined using fluorescein as a reference, with a known Φ value of 0.89 in EtOH [50]. The quantum yield was calculated according to the following equation (1):

$$\Phi_S/\Phi_R = (A_S/A_R) \times (Abs_R/Abs_S) \times \left(\eta^2{}_S/\eta^2{}_R\right) \qquad (1)$$

where Φ is the fluorescence quantum yield; A is the integral of fluorescence spectrum; Abs is the corresponding absorbance at the excitation wavelength; η is refractive index; and the subscripted letters S and R denote sample and reference, respectively.

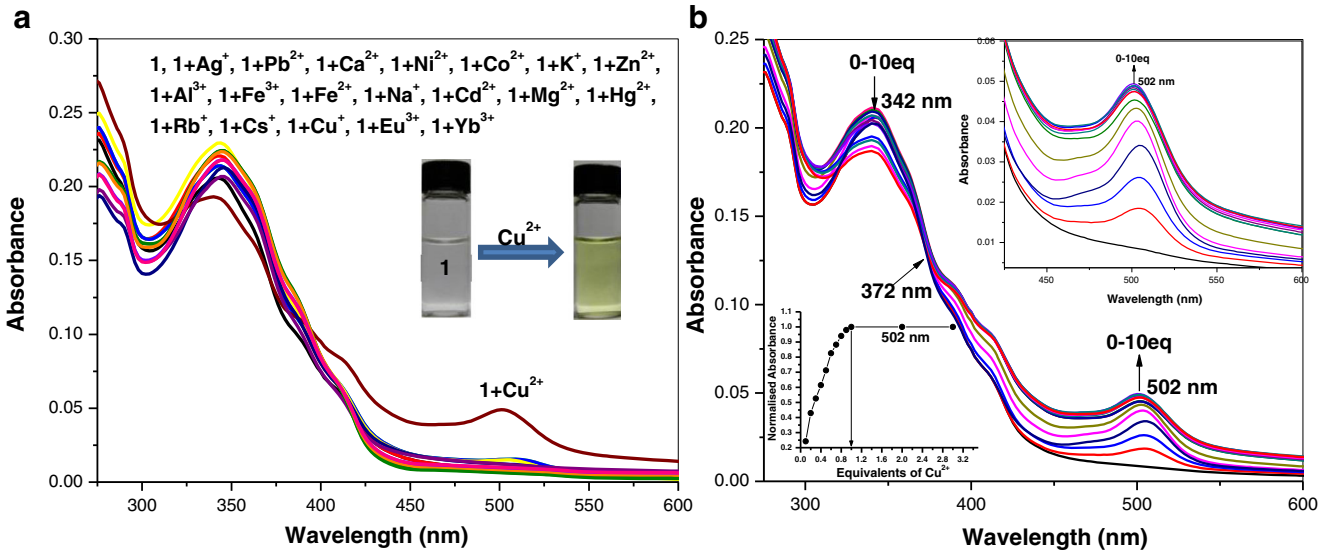



**Fig. 1** UV-Vis spectra of **1** (20 μM) **a** with different cations (10 equivalents), **b** upon the addition of $Cu(NO_3)_2$ (200 μM) in $H_2O$:MeOH (4:1) containing HEPES buffer (10 mM, pH 7.4). Inset: **a** visible color change from colorless to light yellow. **b** Mol ratio plot of absorbance at 502 nm

## Synthesis

*Synthesis of 1*

Fluorescein hydrazide (**3**, 0.5 g, 1.4 mmol) and *N*-methylimidazole-2-carbaldehyde **4** (0.191 g, 1.7 mmol) were suspended in 10 mL of ethanol. The mixture was refluxed for 12 h with stirring, resulting in the formation of a yellow precipitate. The precipitate was separated by filtration and washed with 3 × 10 mL of ethanol. After drying, a yellowish solid was obtained in 85 % yield. mp. 208–210 °C ($CH_2Cl_2$-hexane); $^1$H NMR (400 MHz, DMSO-$d_6$), δ (ppm): 3.74 (s, 3 H), 6.38 (d, $J$ = 6.8 Hz, 3 H), 6.42–6.48 (m, 3 H), 6.59 (d, $J$ = 1.6 Hz, 2 H), 6.96 (d, $J$ = 6.4 Hz, 1 H), 7.63 (t, $J$ = 5.6 Hz, 1 H), 7.69 (t, $J$ = 5.6 Hz, 1 H), 7.77 (d, $J$ = 6.8 Hz, 1 H), 8.24 (s, 1 H), 9.67 (s, 2 H). $^{13}$C NMR (100 MHz, DMSO-$d_6$), δ (ppm): 33.82, 65.83, 102.63, 110.1, 112.29, 122.68, 123.59, 128.14, 128.37, 128.47, 128.5, 128.72, 129.33, 129.76, 132.96, 133.3, 151.75, 152.45, 152.59, 158.36, 158.38, 158.86, 159, 164.37, 165.94 (Fig. S1 and S2). Anal Calcd for 1, $C_{25}H_{18}N_4O_4$: C, 68.49; H, 4.14; N, 12.78, Found: C, 68.38; H, 4.15; N, 12.65; HR-mass Calcd for: $C_{25}H_{18}N_4O_4$ $[M + H]^+$: 439.1406; Found: m/z 439.1405 (Fig. S3).

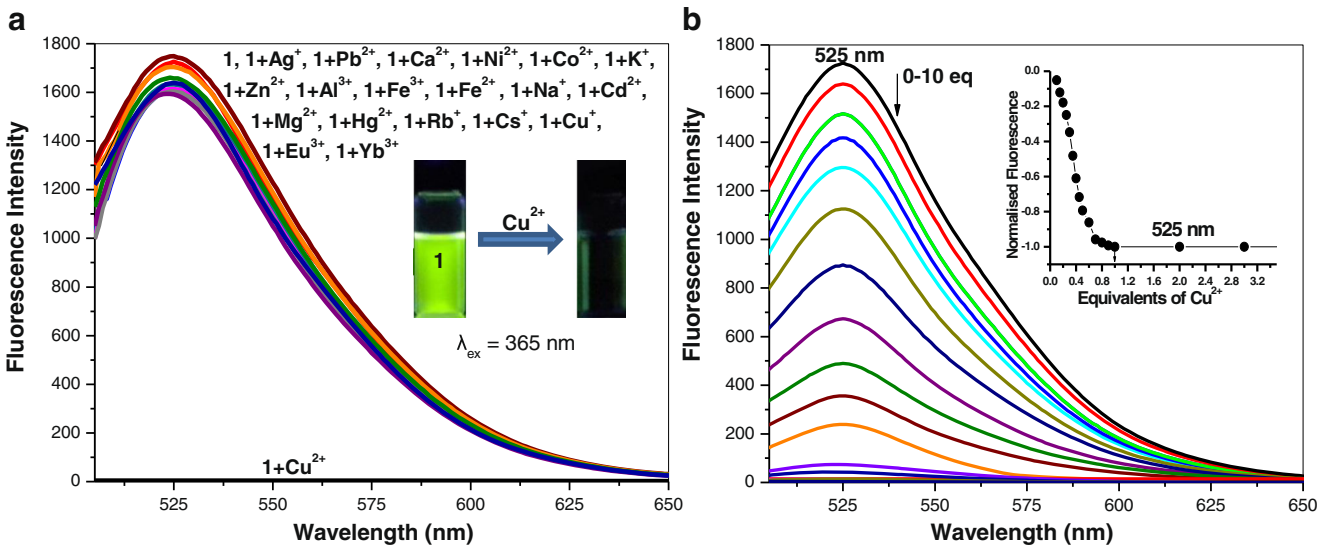



**Fig. 2** Fluorescence spectra of **1** (0.2 μM) **a** with different cations (10 equivalents) **b** as a function of added $Cu(NO_3)_2$ in $H_2O$:MeOH (4:1) containing HEPES buffer (10 mM, pH 7.4). ($\lambda_{ex}$ = 502 nm). Inset: **a** Fluorogenic change from green to colorless upon illumination at 365 nm. **b** Mol ratio plot of emission at 525 nm

*Synthesis of 2*

Fluorescein hydrazide (**3**, 0.4 g, 1.2 mmol) and imidazole-2-carbaldehyde (**5**, 0.133 g, 1.4 mmol) were suspended in 10 mL of ethanol. The mixture was refluxed for 12 h with stirring, resulting in the formation of a yellowish precipitate. The precipitate was separated by filtration and washed with 3 × 10 mL of ethanol. After drying, a yellowish solid in 87 % yield was obtained. mp. 217–219 °C ($CH_2Cl_2$-hexane); $^1$H NMR (400 MHz, DMSO-$d_6$), δ (ppm): 6.46 (dd, $J$ = 8.8 Hz, 2.2 Hz, 3 H), 6.53 (d, $J$ = 6.8 Hz, 3 H), 6.67 (d, $J$ = 2.0 Hz, 2 H), 7.02 (d, $J$ = 6.0 Hz, 1 H), 7.13 (s, NH, 1 H), 7.53 (t, $J$ = 6.0 Hz, 1 H), 7.58 (t, $J$ = 5.6 Hz, 1 H), 7.91 (d, $J$ = 6.0 Hz, 1 H), 8.06 (s, 1 H), 9.6 (s, 2 H). $^{13}$C NMR (100 MHz, DMSO-$d_6$), δ (ppm): 64.47, 102.86, 108.93, 109.84, 112.02, 11,268, 123.33, 126.74, 127.57, 128.33, 128.44, 128.7, 129.01, 129.07, 132.69, 134.37, 137.24, 142.17, 145.52, 151.42, 151.94, 152.33, 158.74, 164.33 (Fig. S4 and S5). Anal Calcd for 2, $C_{24}H_{16}N_4O_4$: C, 67.92; H, 3.80; N, 13.20; Found: C, 67.67, H 3.95; N, 13.02; HR-mass Calcd for: $C_{24}H_{16}N_4O_4$ $[M + H]^+$: 425.1172; Found: m/z 425.1169 (Fig. S6).

***Cu$^{2+}$–1 Complex*** A mixture of **1** (100 mg, 0.23 mmol) and $Cu(NO_3)_2{\cdot}3H_2O$ (62 mg, 0.28 mmol) in methanol (10 mL) was refluxed for 8 h. The mixture was cooled to room temperature and the precipitated complex was filtered. The filtered cake was washed thoroughly with water and ethanol, followed by drying under vacuum to give the copper-bound complex (95 mg, 82 % yield). HR-FAB Mass: calcd for ($C_{25}H_{18}O_4N_4$.Cu) 501.0624; found: 501.0621 (Fig. S7).

## Result and Discussion

Compound **1** was designed to bind metal ions via the carbonyl oxygen, imino N group and the imidazole N atoms serving as electron donors. Scheme 1 outlines the syntheses of **1** and **2**, based on the respective reactions of **3** with *N*-methylimidazole-2-carbaldehyde (**4**) and methylimidazole-2-carbaldehyde (**5**) in ethanol. Both compounds were prepared in good yields and their structures were confirmed using $^1$H and $^{13}$C NMR, mass spectrometry, and elemental analysis (Supporting information S1, S2, S3, and S4). The formation of imine could be easily identified via the =C-H proton singlet peak at δ 8.24 and 8.06 ppm for compounds **1** and **2** respectively. Compounds **1** and **2** could be easily distinguished from one another via the presence of a singlet methyl proton (**N-CH$_3$**) peak at δ 3.74 ppm in **1** and the **NH** singlet peak at δ 7.13 ppm in **2**. The hydroxyl protons of the fluorescein appeared as a singlet at δ 9.67 and 9.60 ppm for **1** and **2**, respectively.

**Table 1** Comparisons of the absorption, emission, and binding properties of sensors **1** and **2** in $H_2O$:MeOH (4:1)

| | **1** | **1** + $Cu^{2+}$ | **2** | **2** + $Cu^{2+}$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| $\lambda_{max}$ (nm) | 342 | 342, 502 | 330 | 330, 502 |
| log ε | 4.1 | 4.0, 3.4 | 3.9 | 3.8, 3.2 |
| $\lambda_{em}$ (nm) | 525 | No fluorescence | 535 | 535 |
| $I/I_0$ | | 0.0 | | 0.2 |
| Φ[a] | 0.32 | | 0.19 | |
| $K_a$ ($M^{-1}$) | | $1.0 \times 10^7$ | | $1.3 \times 10^6$ |

[a] Quantum yields were obtained using Fluorescein in EtOH as standard

All the absorption and emission studies were carried out in a mixed aqueous solution of water and methanol (4:1) containing HEPES buffer (10 mM, pH 7.4) at a concentration of 20 μM and 0.2 μM, respectively. The sensor **1** exhibited an absorption peak at 342 nm, which was ascribed to the absorption of the xanthene moiety [51, 52]; however, there was no observable absorption in the visible region, indicating that probe **1** exists in the lactam form while in solution. However, upon the addition of $Cu^{2+}$ into the solution of **1**, a new red-shifted absorption band at 502 nm was gradually enhanced, while the absorption band at 342 nm decreased synchronously with an isobestic point at 372 nm as shown in Fig. 1b and the solution color changed from colorless to light yellow (Fig. 1a, inset). The peak at 502 nm in the UV-vis spectra was attributed to the ring opening of the spirolactam, which was triggered by the binding of the $Cu^{2+}$ species. The respective absorption bands at 502 nm increased linearly, up to 1 equiv. of $Cu^{2+}$ (Fig. 1b, inset), indicating the formation of a 1:1 complex with a strong binding affinity. The Job's plot of **1** with $Cu^{2+}$ also confirmed the formation of a 1:1 complex (Fig. S8). Under these conditions, the observed response was selective for $Cu^{2+}$ ions. The addition of other common metals cations (10 equiv), particularly the alkali and alkaline earth metals, as well as transition metals, produce minimal or no appreciable spectral changes (Fig. 1a).

Subsequently, emission studies were carried out by adding 10 equiv. of various biologically and non-biologically relevant metal cations into a $H_2O$-MeOH (4:1) solution of **1** (0.2 μM), and their complexation abilities were studied by fluorescence.

Compound **1**, when excited at 502 nm, gave a strong fluorescence emission peak at 525 nm. With the addition of $Cu^{2+}$, the emission was completely quenched and none of the other cations induced such distinct emission shift or quenching

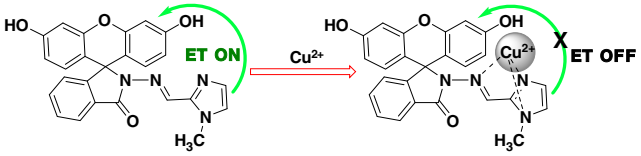



**Fig. 3** The proposed scheme for complexation of sensor **1** with $Cu^{2+}$ ion

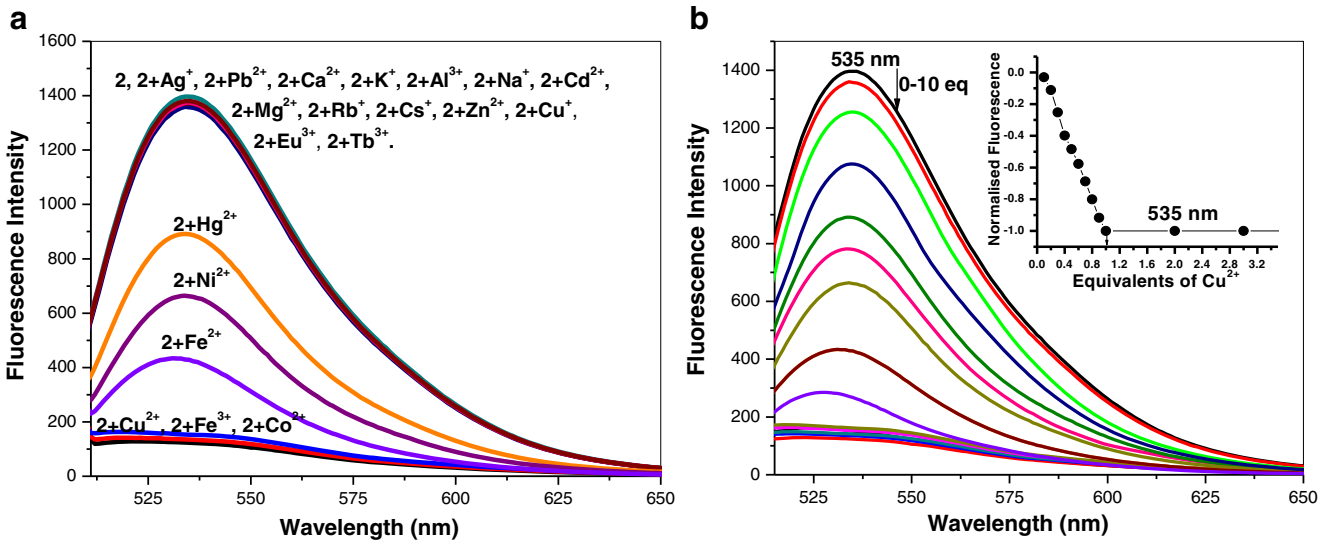



**Fig. 4** Fluorescence spectra of **2** (0.2 μM) **a** with different cations (10 equivalents) **b** as a function of added $Cu(NO_3)_2$ in $H_2O$:MeOH (4:1) containing HEPES buffer (10 mM, pH 7.4). ($\lambda_{ex}$ = 502 nm). Inset: Mol ratio plot of emission at 535 nm

(Fig. 2a). Additionally, the green fluorescence was completely quenched on illumination at 365 nm (Fig. 2a, inset). Fluorescence titration of **1** with $Cu^{2+}$ was carried out in $H_2O$-MeOH (4:1) at a concentration of 0.2 μM. The addition of $Cu^{2+}$ to the solution of **1** resulted in a complete quenching of the fluorescent emission and the peak at 525 nm ($\Phi$ = 0.32, Table 1) was "*switched off*" when excited at 502 nm (Fig. 2b). The relatively long excitation (502 nm) and emission (525 nm) wavelengths of **1** can prevent autofluorescence interference from native cellular species, and limit potential damage to living biological samples [53–56]. The reabsorption of fluorescence in this case can be avoided due to the dilute concentration (0.2 μM), small area of overlapping of the absorption and the fluorescence peaks, and the molar absorptivity is low in the overlapping spectral region [57]. The fluorescein moiety is weakly fluorescent in solution with no absorption in the visible region, owing to the predominance of the ring-closed spirolactam form, which was confirmed by $^{13}C$ NMR signals at δ 65.83 and δ 64.47 ppm for compounds **1** and **2**, respectively [36, 37]. The green fluorescence in **1** and **2** arises as a result of electron transfer (ET) phenomenon from imidazole's nitrogen to the fluorescein ring (i.e., ET is "*switched on*") (Fig. 3) [42–45].

$Cu^{2+}$ being a paramagnetic cationic species, with open shell d-orbitals, quenches the fluorescence of **1** upon binding, presumably due to the ET from imidazole to the metal cation that inevitably inhibits the ET between the fluorescein and imidazole (i.e ET is "*switched off*"). This provides a very fast and efficient nonradiative decay of the excited state that result in quenching [42–45, 58]. The peak at 525 nm showed a linear diminution with increasing $Cu^{2+}$ concentration when the ratio of $Cu^{2+}$ to **1** was ≤1:1. When a 1:1 ratio was reached, however, a higher $Cu^{2+}$ concentration no longer led to any further emission changes (Fig. 2b. inset) [59, 60].

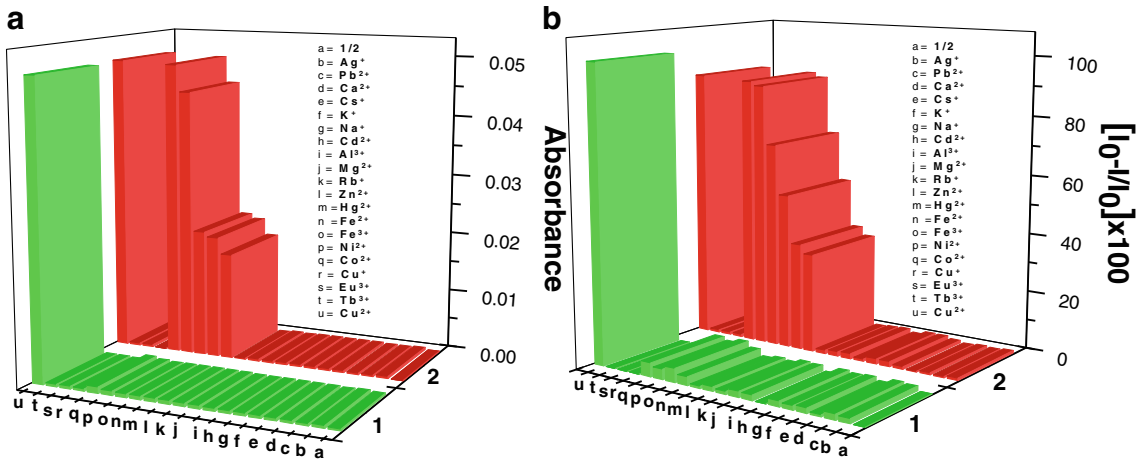



**Fig. 5** Comparative **a** absorption and **b** relative fluorescence spectra of **1** and **2** (0.2 μM) with different cations (10 equivalents) in $H_2O$:MeOH (4:1) containing HEPES buffer (10 mM, pH 7.4)

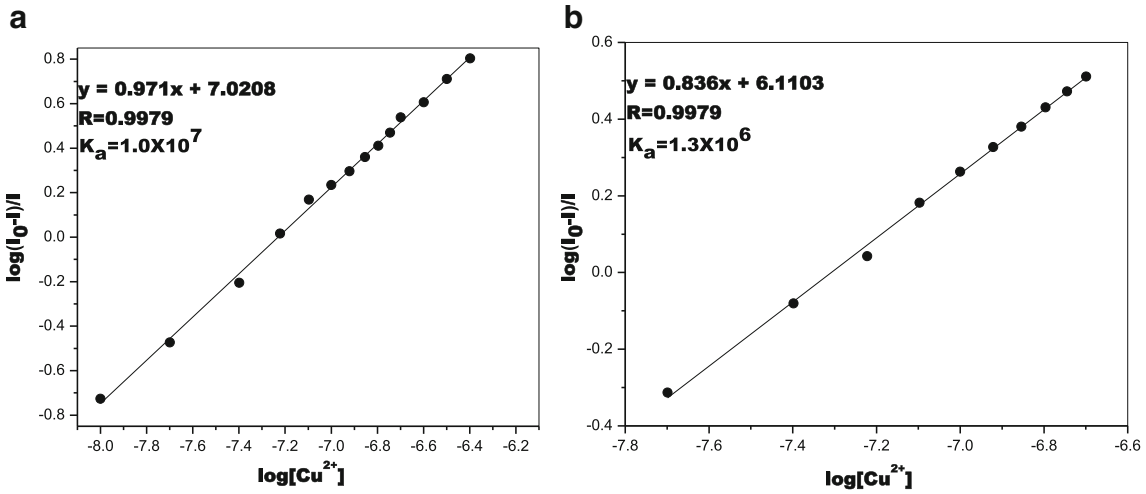



**Fig. 6** Stern–Volmer plot of **a 1** and **b 2** obtained by plotting log $(I_0\text{-}I)/I$ as a function of log[$Cu^{2+}$] in $H_2O$:MeOH (4:1) containing HEPES buffer (10 mM, pH 7.4). ($\lambda_{ex}$ = 502 nm for **1** and **2**)

To evaluate the selectivity and tolerance of **1** for $Cu^{2+}$ over other metal cations, 10 eq. of different metal cations were added to 0.2 μM solutions of **1**. For $Cu^{2+}$, the molecular fluorescence was quenched to a maximum level, therefore demonstrating high molecular sensitivity. Nevertheless, there was no quenching with any other metal ions as shown in Fig. 2a. The observed selectivity is rooted in the fact that although transition metals do not differ much in size, but they can establish coordinative interactions at very different energies. Such behavior can be used for discriminative purposes, especially for fluorescent sensing [61]. This phenomenon is consistent with copper that occurs highest on the Irving–Williams series [62]. Copper(II) has a particularly high thermodynamic affinity for the typical imino nitrogen, carbonyl group of the amide, and the imidazole nitrogen; with fast metal-to-ligand binding kinetics that are not exhibited by other transition metal ions. Competitive binding experiments between different metal ions (10.0 eq.) and $Cu^{2+}$ ion (1.0 eq.) showed that the quenching of $Cu^{2+}$ by **1** was not disrupted by any other species (Fig. S9). It was also found that **1** has a detection limit of 0.037 μM and thus, is able to effectively sense the $Cu^{2+}$ concentration in the blood system and in drinking water (Fig. S10) [31].

In order to study the effect of the *N*-methyl group on the imidazole ring, we prepared compound **2** and studied its absorption and emission properties with different metal cations. The absorption spectra of **2** showed peaks at 330 nm resulting from the absorption of the xanthene moiety [50, 51] and it was selective to $Co^{2+}$, $Fe^{3+}$, and $Cu^{2+}$ (Fig. S11). Fluorescence spectra of **2** in $H_2O$-MeOH (4:1 *v*/*v*) showed the emission peak at 535 nm (Φ = 0.19, Table 1) corresponding to the ET from imidazole to the fluorescein moiety. On addition of different metal cations to **2** $Fe^{3+}$, $Co^{2+}$, and $Cu^{2+}$ completely quenched the fluorescence signal of **2**, with $Hg^{2+}$, $Fe^{2+}$, and $Ni^{2+}$ ions achieving partial quenching (Fig. 4a). In fluorescence titration, the addition of $Cu^{2+}$ up to 1 equiv. completely quenched the emission peak, but no further quenching occurred thereafter (tested up to 10 equiv) (Fig. 4b). The fluorescence titration showed that the complexation of 2 and $Cu^{2+}$ occurs at a 1:1 ratio. Thus, we deduced that the introduction of the electron-donating methyl group on the imidazole ring increases the electron-donating capability of

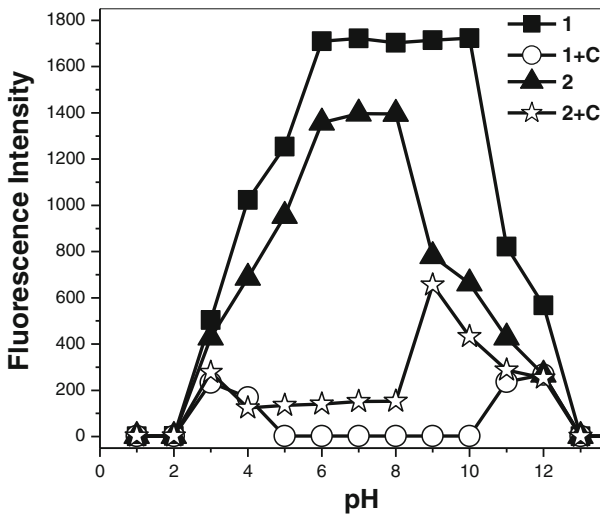
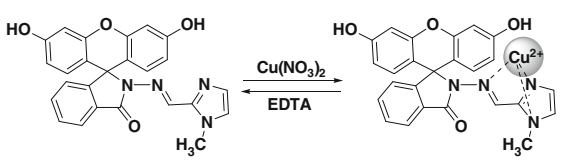



**Fig. 7** Effect of pH on the emission intensities of **1** and **2**, and their $Cu^{2+}$ complexes in $H_2O$:MeOH (4:1) containing HEPES buffer (10 mM, pH 7.4). ($\lambda_{ex}$ = 502 nm for **1** and **2**)




**1**: $\lambda_{max}$ = 342 nm, $\lambda_{em}$ = 525 nm

**1** + $Cu^{2+}$: $\lambda_{max}$ = 502, 342 nm, $\lambda_{em}$ = no fluorescence

**Scheme 2** Reversibility of **1** toward $Cu^{2+}$

imidazole, which makes compound **1** more selective to $Cu^{2+}$ than **2** (Fig. 5) [45].

Based on the fluorescence titration spectra of **1** and **2** with $Cu^{2+}$, the job plot of **1,** and the high resolution (HR)-mass of the **1**-$\mathbf{Cu^{2+}}$ complex, we found that the binding of **1** and **2** with $Cu^{2+}$ follow a 1:1 stoichiometric complex formation in the aqueous MeOH (4:1of $H_2O$-MeOH) solution. Thus, it can be assumed that the fluorescence quenching of **1** and **2** by $Cu^{2+}$ occurs via a static quenching mode owing to the formation of a non-fluorescent complex in the ground state [48]. In the case of a static quenching, the Stern–Volmer plot is linear and it is used to calculate the respective binding constants of **1** and **2** with $Cu^{2+}$ [58, 59]. From the Stern-Volmer linear plot (Fig. 6a and 6b), the binding constant ($K_a$) of **1** and **2** with $Cu^{2+}$ were calculated to be $1.0x10^7$ and $1.3 \times 10^6$ $M^{-1}$ (Error limits ≤10 %) [59, 60]. The binding constant of **1** with $Cu^{2+}$ was ten times greater than that of compound **2** owing to the electron donating nature of the methyl group on the imidazole ring (Table 1) [45].

For environmental and physiological applications, chemosensors should operate in a wide range of pH. As such, the effects of pH on the emission intensities of **1** and **2**, in the absence and presence of $Cu^{2+}$ ions, were investigated in the pH range of 2.0–12.0 (Fig. 7). Fluorescein exists in a closed, colorless, and non-fluorescent spirocyclic form at neutral and basic pH. In both **1** and **2** decreasing the pH value protonates the nitrogen of the imidazole ring and this inhibits the ET to fluorescein, resulting in decreasing fluorescence. Compounds **1** and **2** showed maximum fluorescence intensities at pH 5.0 and 6.0, respectively, and they remained unchanged until the pH value increased to 10.0 (for compound **1**) and 8.0 (for compound **2**). At higher pH values (> 10.0 in case of **1** and >8.0 in case of **2**), the fluorescence intensity decreased due to the enhancement of negative charge density on the imidazole ring and formation of phenolate on the fluorescein core (Figs. S-12a, S-12b) [36, 37, 47–49]. It was shown that the amount of quenching (based on fluorescence intensity) associated with the $Cu^{2+}$ complexes of **1** and **2** increases with ascending pH values, reaching their maximum efficiency at pH 5.0 for **1** + $Cu^{2+}$ and pH 6.0 for **2** + $Cu^{2+}$. The quenching process was eventually disrupted at pH 10.0 and 8.0 for complexes **1** + $Cu^{2+}$ and **2** + $Cu^{2+}$, respectively. As the pH increases, the fluorescence intensities of **1**, **2** and their respective $Cu^{2+}$ complexes become closer, probably owing to the favorable formation of a $Cu^{2+}$ based hydroxo-complex under such conditions (Figs. S-13a, S-13b) [47–49]. Thus, chemosensors **1** and **2** displayed virtually no physiological pH-sensitivity and their fluorescence "*on–off*" can be controlled by $Cu^{2+}$ ion binding within the pH range of 5.0 to 10.0 and 6.0 to 8.0, respectively.

The chemical reversibility of $Cu^{2+}$-induced fluorescence response of **1** in the buffered $H_2O$:MeOH (4:1) solution was investigated. When an aqueous MeOH solution of EDTA (2.0 μM) was added to the complexed solution of **1** (0.2 μM) and $Cu^{2+}$ ions (2.0 μM), the fluorescence signal at 525 nm was instantly recovered. The solution turned from light yellow to colorless (a reversal of Fig. 1a, inset) with the disappearance of the absorption peak at 502 nm. The introduction of the EDTA chelator immediately captured the sensor-bound $Cu^{2+}$, proving that the binding of **1** with $Cu^{2+}$ is a chemically reversible process (Scheme 2). Thus, **1** could potentially serve as a recyclable chemical tool in materials sensing.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we have developed a new highly efficient, reversible chemosensor (**1**) based on a fluorescein-*N*-methylimidazole conjugate for $Cu^{2+}$ sensing in a $H_2O$-MeOH (4:1) solution containing HEPES buffer (10 mM, pH 7.4). Fluorescein-*N*-methylimidazole produces a green fluorescence emission due to ET from imidazole to the fluorescein ring. On the addition of copper cations, the ET is *switched off*, resulting in fluorescence quenching. When compared to fluorescein-imidazole conjugate **2**, we found that the presence of a methyl group on the imidazole ring of sensor **1** improves the selectivity and binding of $Cu^{2+}$.

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