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Size-dependent uptake of nitrate and ammonium as a function of light in well-mixed temperate coastal waters

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Abstract

The effect of light on nitrate (NO₃⁻) and ammonium (NH₄⁺) uptake by natural communities was investigated in relation to cell size (<10 µm and > 10 µm) in the well-mixed coastal waters of the English Channel. Nitrogen (N) uptake kinetics as a function of irradiance were assessed using ¹⁵N tracer techniques, for a seasonal cycle of populations collected at 50% and 1% light penetration depth. The nitrogen uptake responses to irradiance can be represented by the formulation used to describe the photosynthesis versus irradiance relationships and modified by the addition of a dark uptake parameter. The response curves of two size fractions of phytoplankton collected at 50% and 1% of incident light did not differ significantly, which suggested that the physiological characteristics of N uptake were not affected by the light intensity at which the phytoplankton assemblages were sampled. The kinetics parameters indicated that the NO₃⁻ uptake system was more strongly dependent on light than the NH₄⁺ uptake system. They also showed that N uptake was less limited by the light intensity in the small size fraction than it was in the large size fraction. At the mean light intensity in the water column, kinetics analysis predicted a NH₄⁺ uptake that was on average 1.8 (± 0.6) and 2.4 (± 1.0) times greater than the NO₃⁻ uptake, for <10 µm and >10 µm size fractions, respectively. The kinetics also predicted, at the in situ mean light intensity, that the mean ability to take up nitrogen was twice as high (1.8 ± 0.5) for the small than for the large cells when the N substrate was NH₄⁺ and more than twice as high (2.6 ± 1.5) when the substrate was NO₃⁻. These results added to our understanding of the light effect on N uptake processes in well-mixed waters, and can largely explain the phytoplankton production, mainly regenerated and dominated by small cells, that has been observed in these waters.
1. Introduction

It has been clearly established that phytoplankton growth depends on its photosynthesis capacity, as well as its nutrient uptake efficiency in environments where nutrient availability and light resource conditions are not optimal. Among its essential nutrients, nitrogen (N) is believed to play a major role in determining the primary productivity of the ocean (Ryther and Dunstan, 1971; Goldman et al., 1979); therefore, it is essential to determine the key factors that control N use by phytoplankton. Traditionally, the ability of phytoplankton to uptake N has been explained using the nitrogen supply. The positive relationship between N availability and its uptake by phytoplankton is a well documented pattern (Mulholland and Lomas, 2008 and references therein). In addition to substrate effects, it is also well known that N uptake in both cultured and natural communities is linked to the light regime, through photosynthesis, directly or indirectly. The N uptake versus irradiance curves are typically hyperbolic and can be fit mathematically by a simple single Michaelis Menten function (MacIsaac and Dugdale, 1972). The relationship can also be fitted with a modification of the equation of Platt et al. (1980), which was originally developed for the light response of photosynthesis (Priscu et al., 1991). The degree of the N uptake dependence on light appears to be specific to the N substrate, in particular at low light levels and in dark areas where phytoplankton often use \( \text{NH}_4^+ \) more efficiently than \( \text{NO}_3^- \) (Muggli and Smith, 1993; Kudela et al., 1997). This can be also affected by the general physiological status of the population studied. For example, Cochlan et al. (1991) have highlighted that a populations collected from the base of the euphotic zone, and therefore likely acclimated to low light, displayed much less light dependence of \( \text{NO}_3^- \) uptake than those collected in surface waters. Studies have also shown that N deprivation can weaken the light dependence of N uptake (Paasche et al., 1984, Cochlan et al. 1991; Flynn et al 1999). In addition, the degree of N-uptake dependence on
light can also be affected by interactions between N-uptake and cellular growth (Kudela et al. 1997, Clark et al. 2002, Flynn et al. 1999, 2002), which in turn reflects the internal reserves of photosynthetic energy and internal nitrogen pools of the cells. Numerous studies have investigated the N uptake light dependency by considering taxonomic groups (Harisson, 1976; Pasche et al., 1984) or isolated species (Kudela and Cochlan, 2000; Fan and Glibert, 2005). For the above reasons, most of these studies found that the response of N uptake as a function of light is species dependent and highly variable. This makes it difficult to infer how the degree of light dependence on N uptake is affected by taxonomic group or species. To our knowledge, only one study (Frenette et al., 1998) focused on N uptake as a function of cell size in addition to light, and it only considered NO$_3^-$ as the N substrate.

Light has been considered a key factor controlling phytoplankton production in the well-mixed coastal waters of the English Channel (Boalch et al., 1978; Wafar et al., 1983; L’Helguen et al., 1996). In this system, the effect of light on phytoplankton dynamics has been linked to strong hydrodynamic effects induced by tidal currents and wind action. Hydrodynamics prevents the water column from becoming stratified, so that the phytoplankton cells are continuously entrained below the euphotic zone, reducing the light available to them. As a result, primary production tends to increase up to a summer maximum (Boalch et al., 1978), and is in phase with the increase of the incident light and the depth of the euphotic layer. These unusual patterns of carbon uptake formed the basis of earlier interpretations that the primary production cycle was mainly regulated by light (Wafar et al., 1983). The seasonal patterns of N uptake reflected the characteristics of the primary production summer maximum, and chlorophyll a specific N uptake has been related to incident light. These observations led L’Helguen et al. (1996) to conclude that N uptake was strongly limited by light throughout the year. It has also been suggested that the high contribution of NH$_4^+$ to the total N uptake, as well as the dominance of small sizes in
phytoplankton communities, could be controlled by physical forcing, and thus indirectly by the unusual light regime inherent in this system (Wafar et al., 2004). Although convincing, these conclusions suffered from a lack of direct measurements of N uptake as a function of light.

The present paper describes the kinetics of NO$_3^-$ and NH$_4^+$ uptake as a function of irradiance for two size fractions of phytoplankton (<10 µm and >10 µm of size) in the well-mixed waters of the English Channel during a seasonal cycle. The scope of the work assessed the responses of phytoplankton communities to light intensity variations for different environmental conditions, in order to (i) examine the light dependence of N uptake, (ii) investigate the relationships between the used N substrate and the light regime, and (iii) evaluate the hypothesis that small and large cells differ in their N uptake versus light characteristics.

2. Material and Methods

2.1. Sampling

Experiments were conducted from January through December 2005 at a study site (48°45’N, 3°57’40’’W – mean depth: 45 m) investigated previously (Wafar et al., 1983, 2004; Le Corre et al., 1996; L’Helguen et al., 1996). Water samples for the experiment were collected during spring tide at around 8:00 a.m. local time. In each instance, water samples were obtained from three depths (0, 20, and 40 m) to determine the NO$_3^-$ and NH$_4^+$ concentrations. Samples for the N uptake measurements were obtained from the 50% and 1% light penetration depth, as calculated by measuring downwelling radiation with a Licor photometer. Depending on the volume needed, water was collected with 5 or 30 L PVC Niskin bottles.
2.2. Environmental parameters

Vertical profiles for the temperatures and Photosynthetically Active Radiation (PAR 400-700 nm) were recorded using a Seabird SBE 19 system and used to describe the vertical structure of the water column. For each occasion, the light attenuation coefficient $k$ was computed by

$$k = \frac{\ln I_0 - \ln I_z}{z} \quad (1)$$

where $z$ was the water column depth (m); $I_0$ ($\mu$mol photons m$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$) was the surface incident light, and $I_z$ ($\mu$mol photons m$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$) was the light at depth $z$. The mean water column light ($I_m$) was then computed from

$$I_m = I_0 \left(1 - \exp^{-kz}\right) / k.z \quad (2)$$

NO$_3^-$ concentrations were determined using a Technicon Autoanalyseur II following the procedures of Wood et al. (1967), and NH$_4^+$ concentrations were measured manually in triplicate using the indophenol blue method (Koroleff, 1970). The analytical precision (SE) for the NO$_3^-$ and NH$_4^+$ concentration measurements were ± 0.05 and ± 0.02 $\mu$mol L$^{-1}$, respectively.

2.3. N uptake versus light experiments

The uptake rates of NO$_3^-$ and NH$_4^+$ were measured for two size fractions (total community and <10 µm) using the $^{15}$N method. The sampled water was dispensed into eight acid-washed polycarbonate Nalgene bottles (2 L), and enriched with $^{15}$N tracer in the form of Na$^{15}$NO$_3$ or $^{15}$NH$_4$Cl (99 atom% $^{15}$N, CEA, France). In order to prevent any substrate limitation of the N uptake processes during the experiments, the $^{15}$N tracer was added so as to obtain a final concentration 20 $\mu$mol L$^{-1}$ for NO$_3^-$ and 5 $\mu$mol L$^{-1}$ for NH$_4^+$. This addition does not disturb the N uptake processes when the ambient concentrations are sufficient to saturate the N uptake capacity of phytoplankton. In the other hand, it could cause an overestimation of in
situ uptake rates if the concentrations are insufficient to satisfy the maximal uptake capability of cells. In these conditions, $^{15}$N additions could also give rise to initial high rates at the beginning of the incubation or “surge uptake” corresponding to the initial filling of internal pools with inorganic nitrogen (Conway et al., 1976). This effect and negative feedback processes as N pool within the cells are filled, which lead in a second step to a decrease of the N uptake rates, have a short duration (seconds to minutes) and have probably a low impact on the measured rates for incubation time used in the present study (see below). After inoculation, the flasks were then placed in incubators equipped with neutral-density shading screens, which simulated the following photosynthetic photon flux densities: 100, 50, 22.5, 14.5, 8, 3, 1, and 0% of $I_0$. A constant temperature was maintained with a continuous flow of surface seawater. The incubations were stopped after 1 hour to minimize the cells’ acclimation to a particular light level. During such incubation period, one can expected to measure assimilation rather than transport into the cell. However, as the effect of a surge uptake is not completely excluded (see above), we preferred to use the term uptake which included both processes (Flynn, 1998). Following incubation, the samples were separated into two 1 L aliquots. The first aliquot was pre-filtered by gentle suction (<50 mm Hg) using a 10 µm pore size polycarbonate filter. The filtrate and the second aliquot were then filtered onto pre-combusted (450°C, 4h) Whatman-GF/F-filters at a pressure lower than 100 mm Hg. All GF/F-filters were oven dried (60°C) for 24 h prior to the in-lab analysis. These filters were used to determine particulate organic nitrogen (PON) concentrations along $^{15}$N enrichments, enabling NO$_3^-$ and NH$_4^+$ uptake rates for the total and <10 µm size fractions to be obtained. The PON concentrations and $^{15}$N enrichments of organic matter were quantified with a mass spectrometer (Delta plus, ThermoFisher Scientific, Bremen, Germany) coupled with a C/N analyzer (Flash EA, ThermoFisher Scientific) via a type III interface. The standard deviations (SE) were 0.004 µmol L$^{-1}$ and 0.0001 atom % for PON and $^{15}$N enrichment, respectively.
The absolute N uptake rates ($\rho_N$, µmol L$^{-1}$ h$^{-1}$) for the total and <10 µm size fractions were calculated from the equation in Dugdale and Wilkerson (1986), in which the PON concentration was equal to the concentration measured at the end of incubation. The rates for the >10 µm size fraction were obtained by subtracting the <10 µm size fraction rates from those for the total community. The absolute uptake rates were then expressed in term of PON specific uptake rates ($V_N$ h$^{-1}$) by dividing the absolute N uptake rates by the PON concentration. Note that NH$_4^+$ isotope dilution, which can significantly bias uptake rates, was not directly assessed in this study. However, we assumed that the effects of isotope dilution were probably small due to short incubation times (Harrison and Harris, 1986).

2.4. Kinetic parameters and data analysis

The response of N uptake as a function of irradiance was modeled by the multi-parameter formulation proposed by Platt et al. (1980), and modified by adding a positive $y$ intercept to account for dark uptake (Priscu et al., 1991):

$$V_N = V_{max}' (1 - \exp^{-aI}) \exp^{-bI} + V_d \quad (3)$$

where $V_N$ was the N-specific uptake rate (h$^{-1}$); $V_{max}'$ (h$^{-1}$) was the maximal value of $V_N$ in the absence of photoinhibition; $a$ equals $\alpha I/V_{max}'$, where $\alpha$ was the initial slope of the curve; and $b$ equals $\beta I/V_{max}'$, where $\beta$ was the slope of the photo-inhibition portion of the curve. $I$ was the irradiance (µmol photons m$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$) at which $V_N$ is measured, and $V_d$ was the dark specific uptake rate (h$^{-1}$). It was assumed that this last term was constant regardless of light intensity. Note that the values of $V_{max}'$ referred to a portion of the light response curve and did not include the substantial dark N uptake (Cochlan et al., 1991). Therefore, the total maximum specific uptake rates observed ($V_{max}$) were obtained as $V_{max}' + V_d$. The irradiance ($K_{LT}$) at
which the uptake rate was one-half of $V'_{\text{max}}$ was also determined. This facilitated comparisons with previously published kinetic studies for which the N uptake versus irradiance curves were mathematically fit by a Michaelis-Menten type equation. The $\alpha$ parameter given by the Platt et al. equation then became equivalent to the $V'_{\text{max}} / K_{LT}$ ratio, which is often used as an index of the phytoplankton communities’ sensitivity to nitrogen take up at low light intensities.

A Matlab® iterative curve fitting procedure was used to generate the descriptive curve parameters for all kinetics. The criterion $r^2 > 0.8$ was applied to determine if the curve was adjusted to the experimental data. For each experiment, an F-test was performed according to Mead and Curnow (1983) and Potvin and Lechowicz (1990) to test if the curves at 50% and 1% of $I_0$ were significantly different. In this test, the mean square residual obtained by fitting the equation to all data points was compared with that obtained by fitting the equation separately to data from each light depth. The acceptance of the null hypothesis, i.e., that there was no significant increase in the residual sum of squares that resulted from grouping the data, was equivalent to the absence of a significant light depth effect on the $V_N-I$ curve response. The same test was also used to compare the $V_N-I$ curves of $<10 \; \mu\text{m}$ and $>10 \; \mu\text{m}$-size fractions and those obtained for NO$_3^-$ and NH$_4^+$. Paired-sample Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were used to determine whether the difference observed between the kinetics parameters for the two size fractions and/or for the two substrates studied were statistically significant ($P< 0.05$). Non-parametric tests were selected due to the small number of data sets and their non-normal distribution.

3. Results
3.1. Physical and chemical setting

The solar radiation varied from 1 to 37 MJ m\(^{-2}\) day\(^{-1}\) during the seasonal cycle, with a period of high radiation (mean ± SE: 20 ± 7 MJ m\(^{-2}\) day\(^{-1}\)) occurring between April and August (Fig. 1(a)). The euphotic zone depth (\(Z_e\)), defined as the depth corresponding to 1% of incident light (\(I_0\)), was between 11 m and 38 m (Fig. 1(b)) and varied as the solar radiation. The mean light in the water-column (\(I_m\)) ranged from 17 to 97 µmol photons m\(^{-2}\) s\(^{-1}\) (mean: 57 µmol photons m\(^{-2}\) s\(^{-1}\)) (Fig. 1(c)), which corresponded to an \(I_0\) range of 11.6-20.1% (mean: 14.5%). The seasonal changes in \(I_m\) were also generally similar to those in the solar radiation, with maximum values occurring in spring-summer. The occasional transient decrease of \(I_m\) and \(Z_e\) observed in May and July were related to a lower penetration of light within the water column, induced by high turbidity. The increase of solar radiation with the onset of summer led to a continued warming of the water column, from 8.5°C in March to 15.2°C in August (Fig. 1(d)). Water temperatures were vertically uniform during the study period, consistent with the permanently well-mixed waters of the English Channel (Boalch et al., 1978; Wafar et al., 1983). This homogenous feature of the water column was associated with the combined effects of strong tidal currents and wind action, which together distributed the heat flow throughout the whole water column and prevented seasonal stratification.

Dissolved inorganic nitrogen (DIN) concentrations also followed seasonal trends similar to those reported in earlier studies (Wafar et al., 1983). Nitrate (0.35 – 9.05 µmol L\(^{-1}\)) was the major DIN compound throughout the year (Fig. 2). Seasonally there was slow and extended nitrate utilization during spring phytoplankton growth, and it was also present in residual concentrations (between 0.35 and 1.10 µmol L\(^{-1}\)) at the end of spring and summer. Ammonium concentrations varied from 0.10 to 0.78 µmol L\(^{-1}\), with the spring-summer
accumulation accounting for most of this variation (Fig. 2). No significant differences in NO$_3^-$ and NH$_4^+$ concentrations between the surface and depth were observed during the year. Previous studies conducted at the same station (L’Helguen et al., 1996) indicated that ambient concentrations of about 1.0 and 0.3 µmol L$^{-1}$ for NO$_3^-$ and NH$_4^+$ respectively, were sufficient to saturate N uptake processes. Although not tested here, it was therefore likely that NO$_3^-$ uptake was independent on its availability at any time of the year, except for a brief period in late May when concentrations were at their lowest. This was also probably the case for NH$_4^+$ uptake for late spring to summer when phytoplankton was actively growing. On the other hand, NH$_4^+$ uptake could be substrate dependent in winter-early spring and in autumn when NH$_4^+$ concentrations were less than ~ 0.3 µmol L$^{-1}$.

3.2. N uptake versus light kinetics

The responses curves for NO$_3^-$ and NH$_4^+$ uptake versus light for the two planktonic size fractions (<10 µm and >10 µm), at 50% and 1% of $I_0$, could be described ($r^2 > 0.8$) by the modified formulation of Platt et al. (1980) in 94% of the experiments during the spring-autumn period. In winter, the uptake rates did not vary significantly with light and were not correctly modeled; therefore, only data obtained between March and November are presented here (Fig. 3 and 4).

When the N substrate was in the form of NO$_3^-$, a comparison of the $V_N$-$I$ curves at 50% and 1% of $I_0$ using the F-test led to the acceptance of the null hypothesis (P > 0.05) in all cases. This conclusion held regardless of the size fraction, indicating that there was no significant difference between the two depths. When NH$_4^+$ was the N substrate, the same result was obtained in 82% of the cases for the <10 µm size fraction, and in all cases for the >10 µm size fraction. This meant that the $V_N$-$I$ curves obtained at 50% and 1% of $I_0$ were generally not significantly different, and they could be described by the same $V_N$-$I$ curves. Using the F-test
to compare the $V_r$-$I$ response curves for the <10 $\mu$m and >10 $\mu$m size fractions at the two light depths led to the non-acceptance of the null hypothesis ($P<0.05$). This occurred due to the absence of a significant size fraction effect in 75% of the cases when the N substrate was NO$_3^-$, and in 79% of the cases when it was NH$_4^+$. Thus, the $V_r$-$I$ curves obtained for the two size fractions must be analyzed independently regardless of the N substrate. The null hypothesis was also not accepted when comparing the $V_r$-$I$ curves for NO$_3^-$ and NH$_4^+$ uptake at the two light depths, in 86% of the cases for the <10 $\mu$m size fraction and in 61% of the cases for the >10 $\mu$m size fraction. This implied that the data obtained for the two substrates must be treated separately.

3.3. Kinetic parameters of N uptake

The kinetic parameters of NO$_3^-$ and NH$_4^+$ uptake as a function of irradiance for the two size fractions are summarized in Table 1. Since the $V_r$-$I$ responses curves were governed by the same parameters independently of the light depth at which the phytoplankton assemblages were sampled, the presented data provided only the means of the parameters obtained at 50% and 1% of $I_0$.

3.3.1. Small size fraction

The maximum NH$_4^+$ uptake rates ($V'_{\text{max NH}_4}$) for the <10 $\mu$m size fraction displayed seasonal changes (Kruskal-Wallis test, $X^2 = 8.25$; $P_{\text{value}} = 0.02$), with highest values in summer. In contrast, no significant trend was seen in the maximum NO$_3^-$ uptake rates ($V'_{\text{max NO}_3}$) throughout the year (Kruskal-Wallis test, $X^2 = 1.60$; $P_{\text{value}} = 0.45$). The values of $V'_{\text{max}}$ for the NH$_4^+$ uptake exceeded (Wilcoxon signed-rank test, $P = 0.005$) those obtained for the NO$_3^-$ uptake (Fig. 5), and were reached for irradiances ($E_{\text{opt NH}_4}$) (mean ± SE: 288 ± 94 $\mu$mol photons m$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$; 29 ± 13% of $I_0$) that were significantly lower (Wilcoxon signed-rank test, $P =$
0.006) than the corresponding $E_{opt}$ for NO$_3^-$ (mean ± SE: 583 ± 268 µmol photons m$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$; 56 ± 25% of $I_0$) (Fig. 5). Another difference between the NH$_4^+$ and NO$_3^-$ uptake for this size community was apparent at low irradiances, and was reflected by $K_{LT}$ values of the NH$_4^+$ uptake (mean ± SE: 43 ± 15 µmol photons m$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$) that were less (Wilcoxon signed-rank test, $P = 0.002$) than those of the NO$_3^-$ uptake (mean ± SE: 98 ± 44 µmol photons m$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$) (Fig. 5). On average, the $K_{LT}$ values represented 4.3 ± 1.8% of $I_0$ for NH$_4^+$ uptake, and 10.3 ± 4.6% of $I_0$ for NO$_3^-$ uptake. Dark uptake accounted for a substantial portion of the total maximum uptake ($V_{max}$), ranging from 15 to 57% (mean ± SE: 42 ± 13%) and from 39 to 76% (mean ± SE: 59 ± 13%) of $V_{max}$ for NH$_4^+$ and NO$_3^-$ uptake respectively. Note that the $V_d$ values for the NH$_4^+$ uptake were larger than those for the NO$_3^-$ uptake (Fig. 5). The N uptake was generally only slightly photo-inhibited at high irradiances (Fig. 3 and 4), with a mean reduction (± SE) compared to $V_{max}$ of 13.2 ± 6.3% and 9.5% ± 11.0% for the NH$_4^+$ and NO$_3^-$ uptake, respectively. No significant difference (Wilcoxon signed-rank test, $P = 0.117$) was observed in the photo-inhibition effect between the NH$_4^+$ and NO$_3^-$ uptakes.

3.3.2. Large size fraction

The maximum uptake rates ($V'_{max}$) of NH$_4^+$ for the >10 µm size fraction, as for the <10 µm size fraction, varied markedly between the seasons (Kruskal-Wallis test, $X^2 = 5.25$; $P_{value} = 0.05$). This was in contrast to the NO$_3^-$ rates (Kruskal-Wallis test, $X^2 = 0.04$; $P_{value} = 0.98$). The values of $V'_{max}$ for the NH$_4^+$ uptake were generally higher than those for the NO$_3^-$ uptake (Fig. 6), although the differences were not significant (Wilcoxon signed-rank test, $P = 0.117$). The $E_{opt}$ values were consistently lower (Wilcoxon signed-rank test, $P = 0.007$) for the NH$_4^+$ uptake (mean ± SE: 289 ± 81 µmol photons m$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$; 35 ± 25% of $I_0$) than for the NO$_3^-$ uptake (mean ± SE: 619 ± 294 µmol photons m$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$; 57 ± 27% of $I_0$) (Fig. 6). The $K_{LT}$ values for NH$_4^+$ (mean ± SE: 48 ± 19 µmol photons m$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$; 4.3 ± 1.7 % of $I_0$) were also significantly less
(Wilcoxon signed-rank test, \( P = 0.005 \)) than those found for \( \text{NO}_3^- \) (mean ± SE: 132 ± 96 \( \mu \text{mol photons m}^{-2} \text{s}^{-1} \); 12.3 ± 8.7 \% of \( I_0 \)) (Fig. 6), indicating a lesser dependence on light for the \( \text{NH}_4^+ \) uptake system. This lesser dependence was likewise obvious in the dark uptake rates, as the \( V_d \) values for the \( \text{NH}_4^+ \) uptake were relatively high (Wilcoxon signed-rank test, \( P = 0.005 \)) compared with those of the \( \text{NO}_3^- \) uptake (Fig. 6). In addition, the dark uptake contribution to the total maximum uptake was generally higher for \( \text{NH}_4^+ \) (mean ± SE: 33 ± 17\%; range: 12 – 74\%) than for \( \text{NO}_3^- \) (mean ± SE: 24 ± 12\%; range: 0 – 45\%). In general, photo-inhibition occurred at high irradiances for the two N substrates (Figs. 3 and 4). At 100\% of \( I_0 \), the reduction of the N uptake compared to \( V_{\text{max}} \) was on average (± SE) 18.7 ± 9.9 \% for \( \text{NH}_4^+ \) and 19.2 ± 20.3\% for \( \text{NO}_3^- \).

4. Discussion

4.1. Light dependence of N uptake

The lack of significant differences between the \( V_N-I \) curves of the phytoplankton populations collected at 50\% and 1\% of \( I_0 \), both for the <10 \( \mu \text{m} \) and >10 \( \mu \text{m} \) size fractions, indicated that the phytoplankton communities’ response to light variations was independent of the light depth at which the cells were sampled. This suggested that the phytoplankton’s physiological properties for N uptake were similar regardless of the water column depth. This situation can occur in well-mixed waters where the cells were exposed to temporal and spatial variations in light intensity, if the vertical mixing which displaced the algal cells to different levels of light within the water column took place on smaller time scales than those for photo acclimation processes (Lewis et al., 1984). Under these conditions, the cells under exposure to light could not adjust their physiological characteristics to the light intensity; they were acclimated to continuously changing light conditions ranging from darkness to saturated light values. Thus,
the prevailing light available for N uptake was not that at a particular stratum of the euphotic
zone, but rather was the mean light \((I_m)\) within the entire column. For the < 10 µm size-
fraction, the \(I_m\) values were significantly lower than the \(E_{opt}\) values, accounting for not more
than \(12 \pm 8\%\) of \(E_{opt}\) (range: 4 - 29%) when the N substrate was \(\text{NO}_3^-\), and only \(22 \pm 13\%\)
(range: 5 - 58%) when the N substrate was \(\text{NH}_4^+\) (Fig. 7). A comparison of \(I_m\) and \(E_{opt}\) values
for the > 10 µm size fraction showed the same trend (Fig. 7), with \(I_m\) values corresponding to
\(12 \pm 8\%\) (range: 4 – 21%) and \(28 \pm 22\%\) (range: 6 – 80%) of \(E_{opt}\) for \(\text{NO}_3^-\) and \(\text{NH}_4^+\),
respectively.

The \(E_{opt}\) values for the two size fractions and for the two N substrates fell within the range of
reported values from previous field studies. They were of the same order as those found by
Pennock (1987) for \(\text{NO}_3^-\) (60 – 569 µmol photons m\(^{-2}\) s\(^{-1}\)) and \(\text{NH}_4^+\) (49 – 375 µmol photons
m\(^{-2}\) s\(^{-1}\)) in the Delaware estuary during a seasonal cycle. This range of values has also been
reported by Cabrita et al. (1999) in the Targus estuary (400 – 900 µmol photons m\(^{-2}\) s\(^{-1}\)), and
by Kudela and Cochlan (2000) at Newport Beach in southern California (400 – 500 µmol
photons m\(^{-2}\) s\(^{-1}\)). The low \(I_m / E_{opt}\) ratios measured in the coastal waters of the English Channel
thus should not have indicated particular high values of \(E_{opt}\), corresponding to the distinct
physiological properties of phytoplankton communities. Rather, they referred to the low mean
light available (<100 µmol photons m\(^{-2}\) s\(^{-1}\)) compared to \(E_{opt}\). To investigate the real effect of
the ambient light intensity, the N uptake rates at \(I_m\) were calculated for \(I_m (V_{Im})\) using the
kinetics parameters of the \(V_N-I\) curves, and then they were compared with those obtained for
\(E_{opt} (V_{max})\). For all data, the \(V_{Im}\) values were generally well below the \(V_{max}\) values (Fig. 8), with
a mean \(V_{Im} / V_{max}\) ratio of \(0.7 \pm 0.1\) for \(\text{NH}_4^+\) and \(0.5 \pm 0.2\) for \(\text{NO}_3^-\). These results clearly
demonstrated the strong control of N uptake by light, even in summer when the solar radiation
is maximal. These results support the hypothesis previously advanced, that the N uptake, as
the primary production (Wafar et al. 1983), was mainly regulated by light over the year in the
well-mixed coastal waters of English Channel (L’Helguen et al., 1996). Low light available, caused by continual mixing, could also have explained the lower N uptake rates measured in these waters compared to rates in other coastal waters (L’Helguen et al., 1996).

4.2. Significant dark N uptake

Our results emphasized a significant dark N uptake, both for the N substrates and for the size fractions examined. This was not unexpected and was consistent with the findings from a wide variety of environments, i.e., that unlike photosynthetic C fixation, the N uptake process was not generally strictly light dependent (Dortch and Maske, 1982; Harrison et al., 1990; Cochlan et al., 1991; Kudela and Cochlan, 2000; Riegman et al., 2000; Fan and Glibert, 2005). Dark N uptake could be related to intermediate metabolic pathways which can provide an alternative energy source for phytoplankton cells to take up nitrogen in the absence of light (Priscu, 1984). However, the ability of phytoplankton to take up NO₃⁻ and NH₄⁺ in darkness showed a high variability which may result from a number of factors. First, the dark N uptake rates appeared to differ among specific groups such as diatoms and dinoflagellates (Cochlan et al., 1991; Chang and McClean, 1999; Clark et al., 2002; Lim et al., 2006). The ability to perform dark N uptake also depended on the physiological state of the cells, and the enhancement of dark N uptake relative to total N uptake has been suggestive of N deprivation (Harrison, 1976; Paasche et al., 1984; Kanda et al., 1989; Rigano et al., 1990; Smith et al., 1992). For example, Paasche et al. (1984) showed in culture that Gyrodinium aureolum did not up take NO₃⁻ in the dark under N-replete growth conditions; however, when the culture was N starved, the dark uptake represented 50% of the light uptake. N deficiency of the cells could explain, at least for a part, the high dark uptake for NH₄⁺ during some periods of the year, but not that for NO₃⁻. Alternatively, a substantial fraction of the measured dark N uptake could be ascribed to heterotrophic bacteria, since Whatman-GF/F-filters used to collect PON
do not discriminate completely between bacteria and phytoplankton (Lee and Fuhrman, 1987). Laws et al. (1985) concluded that the contribution of bacteria to the N uptake accounted for at least 50 to 75% of total microbial N uptake in the coastal waters of the Hawaiian Islands. During the US JGOFS North Atlantic Bloom process uptake, Kirchman et al. (1994) estimated that 22 - 39% of NH$_4^+$ uptake was due to bacteria. Comparable bacteria data were not available for the present study. Nonetheless, it has been shown previously at the same station that the N uptake by the <1 µm size fraction, in which more than 70% of the heterotrophic bacteria were enumerated (L'Helguen et al., 2005), constituted less than 10% of the total N uptake, with mostly autotrophic N uptake (Wafar et al., 2004). Hence, the proportion of dark uptake involving the non-photosynthetic organisms was probably reduced. Finally, with waters in which dynamic processes expose the algal cells to fluctuations in light intensity, from saturated light energy at the surface to darkness at depth, it is likely that a strong ability to take up nitrogen in darkness may be necessary for phytoplankton communities to acquire and use resources for their growth and maintenance. The relatively high contribution of dark uptake to total uptake could be related to an ecological adaptation strategy due to the low light resulting from strong vertical mixing of the water column (Richardson et al., 1983; Huisman and Weissing, 1994; Cullen and MacIntyre, 1998; Moore et al., 2006). This view was supported by the model of Litchman et al. (2004), in which species or taxonomic groups that maintain high uptake rates in darkness or low light have a competitive advantage under low light regimes such as those encountered in deep mixed systems.

4.3. N uptake as a function of light and N substrate

Kinetics parameters showed that the NO$_3^-$ uptake system appeared more light-dependent than the NH$_4^+$ uptake system. This was initially supported by the irradiance ($E_{opt}$) needed to reach
$V'_{max}$, which was always higher for NO$_3^-$ than for NH$_4^+$ in both small and large size fractions. As suggested by other experimental studies (Kudela et al., 1997; Mulholland et al., 1999; Clark et al., 2002), the fact that the $V_d$ values were generally lower for NO$_3^-$ uptake than for NH$_4^+$ uptake also indicated a stronger dependence of NO$_3^-$ uptake on light. The close coupling between the NO$_3^-$ uptake process and light is equally reflected in the $K_{LT}$ values, with an average ($\pm$ SE) $K_{LT\ NO3} / K_{LT\ NH4}$ ratio of 2.4 ($\pm$ 1.1) for the <10 µm size fraction and 3.1 ($\pm$ 1.8) for the >10 µm size fraction. Similarly, $K_{LT\ NO3}$ values double those of NH$_4^+$ were reported for natural phytoplankton assemblages in the Indian Sector of the Southern Ocean (Slawyk, 1979). The same patterns were observed in the Tagus estuary (Cabrita et al., 1999) and in the Auke Bay (Kanda et al., 1989). Muggli and Smith (1993) found greater differences between $K_{LT}$ values for NO$_3^-$ and NH$_4^+$ uptake ($K_{LT\ NO3} / K_{LT\ NH4} \sim 5$) in the Greenland Sea during early spring. The effect of low irradiances on the N substrate dependent uptake can also be expressed by comparing the $V'_{max} / K_{LT}$ ratios for NO$_3^-$ and NH$_4^+$. These ratios are always lower for NO$_3^-$ uptake than for NH$_4^+$ uptake, both for small and large size fractions, showing that NO$_3^-$ uptake is substantially less sensitive at low irradiances than NH$_4^+$ uptake. This difference between the response of NO$_3^-$ and NH$_4^+$ uptake to light might be an indication of the large amount of photosynthetically derived energy required for the translocation of NO$_3^-$ across the cell membrane (Falkowski and Stone, 1975), as well as the enzymatic reduction process of NO$_3^-$ to NH$_4^+$ (Syrett, 1981). As a consequence, low light conditions such as those that prevailed in the well-mixed waters of the English Channel, were not conducive to the efficient utilization of NO$_3^-$ compared to NH$_4^+$. At the ambient light intensity ($I_a$), uptake rates of NH$_4^+$ were on average greater than those of NO$_3^-$ for the small ($V_{Im\ NH4} / V_{Im\ NO3} = 1.8 \pm 0.6$) and large ($V_{Im\ NH4} / V_{Im\ NO3} = 2.4 \pm 1.0$) size fractions (Fig. 9). Thus, low light conditions in this system resulting from vertical mixing may have been one of the reasons that nitrogen taken up by the phytoplankton was mainly in the form of NH$_4^+$. This
particular feature may have accounted for the dominant regenerated production characteristic of the well-mixed waters of the English Channel (Maguer et al., 1998), which was first related to an intense regeneration by the microheterotrophs throughout the year, and also to the continuous injection of regenerated products into the euphotic zone by vertical mixing (Le Corre et al., 1996). In addition, the large contribution of $\text{NH}_4^+$ to the phytoplankton nutrition in this system resulted in the inhibition effect of ammonium on NO$_3^-$ uptake, in particular during spring-summer when ammonium concentrations were sufficiently high to exert a sustained reduction of NO$_3^-$ uptake (L’Helguen et al., 1996).

4.4. N uptake as a function of light and cells size

The response of N uptake to irradiance also varied with cell size, as observed in the differences between the $V_N$-$J$ curves for the $<10 \mu$m and $>10 \mu$m size fractions (Figs. 3 and 4). This size effect was highlighted for the NO$_3^-$ uptake, with consistently higher $V'_{\text{max}}$ values (Wilcoxon signed-rank test, $P = 0.041$) in the $>10 \mu$m than the $<10 \mu$m size fraction. This could reflect their larger specific storage volume relative to their biomass (Stolte and Riegman. 1995). No significant difference (Wilcoxon signed-rank test, $P = 0.575$) was apparent in the $K_{LT}$ values for this compound between the size fractions. Thus, the differences in $V'_{\text{max}}$ values also led to $V'_{\text{max}} / K_{LT}$ ratios significantly higher (Wilcoxon signed-rank test, $P = 0.033$) in the $>10 \mu$m than in the $<10 \mu$m size fraction, suggesting a more pronounced sensitivity of the NO$_3^-$ uptake process to light with the largest cells. This result agreed with the findings of Frenette et al. (1998) on the natural phytoplankton communities of Lake Biwa, that emphasized for NO$_3^-$ uptake $V'_{\text{max}}$ values two times higher, and $\alpha$ values an order of magnitude higher, for the large cells than for the small ones. These authors also showed that larger cells may achieve a higher biomass C increment per unit of NO$_3^-$ taken up. The greater sensitivity of the large cells’ NO$_3^-$ uptake process to light may then be a strong selective
advantage of large cells over small cells under increased light conditions, even more so as their ability to store NO$_3^-$ can be more pronounced (Stolte and Riegman, 1995). On the other hand, the $K_{LT}$ and $V'_{max}$ values for NH$_4^+$ uptake showed no significant difference (Wilcoxon signed-rank test, P > 0.05) between the size fractions, which clearly demonstrated that the response of NH$_4^+$ uptake to irradiance, unlike that of NO$_3^-$ uptake, did not depend on the size of the cells. These distinct responses of the phytoplankton communities to light supported the classic partitioning of N uptake between size fractions. In N-replete waters, this partitioning predicts an increase of NO$_3^-$ uptake by large size fractions at the onset of stratification, due to increasing irradiance. Such situations are usually reported at the early spring in coastal waters and on continental shelves (Kanda et al., 1989; Dauchez et al., 1996; Tremblay et al., 2000). For example, Dauchez et al. (1996) reported that between 60 and 90% of NO$_3^-$ uptake was due to large cells during the spring bloom on the Scotian Shelf. A dominance of large cells in NO$_3^-$ uptake has also been reported in near shore waters influenced by freshwater runoff, consequent to an NO$_3^-$ enrichment of surface waters (Furnas, 1983; Wilkerson et al., 2000) and also to haline stratification of the water column which confers favorable light conditions for species growth (Maguer et al., 2009). As previously reported in the Ushant front (Le Corre et al., 1993), a greater contribution of the large cells to NO$_3^-$ uptake was also associated with the stratified side of tidal fronts after a spring tide, when NO$_3^-$ concentrations and ambient light intensity were optimal.

The cell size effect on N uptake was also expressed in kinetic parameters by a dark N uptake that was significantly higher in the <10 µm than in the >10 µm size fraction, for both NO$_3^-$ (Wilcoxon signed-rank test, P = 0.003) and NH$_4^+$ (Wilcoxon signed-rank test, P = 0.005). This suggested a size specificity in the ability of phytoplankton communities to take up nitrogen in the absence of light. As a consequence, in ambient light conditions ($I_m$), the ability of the <10 µm size fraction in taking up NO$_3^-$ was more than twice (mean ± SE = 2.5 ± 1.5) that of the
>10 µm size fraction, despite the greatest sensitivity of the large cells to take up NO\textsubscript{3} at light. Also, the ability of the <10 µm size fraction was about twice as high (mean ± SE = 1.8 ± 0.5) than that of the >10 µm size fraction when the substrate was NH\textsubscript{4}\textsuperscript{+} (Fig. 10). It was thus likely that the low light conditions that prevailed in the well-mixed waters of the English Channel could largely explain the dominant contribution of the small cells in N uptake (L’Helguen et al., 1996). The potential limitation of NH\textsubscript{4}\textsuperscript{+} concentrations during some periods of the year whereas NO\textsubscript{3}\textsuperscript{−} was saturating could also be a favorable condition for the dominance of small cells in N uptake. Indeed, relatively low levels of NH\textsubscript{4}\textsuperscript{+} can be expected to be less disadvantageous for the small than for the large cells due to their higher affinity for this substrate (Chisholm, 1992). In addition, NO\textsubscript{3}\textsuperscript{−} uptake was proved to be more sensitive to the inhibition effect of ammonium in the small than in the large cells (L’Helguen et al 2008). This could give an advantage to small cells for the NO\textsubscript{3}\textsuperscript{−} uptake when NH\textsubscript{4}\textsuperscript{+} was at low concentrations.

5. Conclusions

In the coastal waters of the western English Channel, the vertical mixing of the water column induced by strong tidal currents continuously entrains the phytoplankton cells below the euphotic zone, reducing the light available to them. As a consequence, light is the main factor limiting the primary production in this system. Our results demonstrated that N uptake was only mainly regulated by the low light available during the year. The kinetic parameters of \( V_{\text{N}}-I \) curves showed that low light conditions were unfavorable both to NO\textsubscript{3}\textsuperscript{−} uptake and to an efficient uptake of nitrogen by the largest cells. In other words, the low light available to phytoplankton in the well-mixed waters of the English Channel was proven to be one of
reasons why primary production was mainly regenerated and was dominated by small size fractions.

The mean light level available to cells in well-mixed waters is affected by the surface incident light and by the ratios between the depth of the mixed layer (Zm) and that of the euphotic layer (Ze). One can therefore expect in this type of ecosystem that larger Zm/Ze ratios than that of the study site (mean 1.9) would increase the limiting light effect and the dominance of small cells in N uptake. Conversely, smaller ratios could lead to a less marked limiting light effect that could further promote NO₃ uptake by large cells. In a general manner, our results suggest that light conditions resulting from vertical mixing (and the Zm/Ze ratios) could determine the nature of production (new vs regenerated) for the total phytoplankton community as well as the trophic structure of the phytoplankton community.

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References


Legends of tables and figures

Table 1: Kinetic parameters describing the characteristics of NH$_4^+$ and NO$_3^-$ uptake as a function of light and cell size, for the phytoplankton community in the well-mixed waters of the English Channel. The presented values are the means of parameters obtained at the two light depths (50 and 1% of $I_0$) where the phytoplankton samples were collected. Values for maximum ($V'_{max}$) and dark ($V_d$) uptake rates are in units of h$^{-1}$, % inh, which describe the reduction of N uptake at 100% of $I_0$ expressed as a percentage of total maximum uptake ($V'_{max} + V_d$). Light indices ($K_{LT}$ and $E_{opt}$) are given in µmol photons m$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$ and as a percentage of incident light intensity (in parentheses). n.d. indicates that parameters could not be generated with the formulation used.

Fig. 1: Seasonal variations of (a) solar radiation; (b) euphotic zone depth ($Z_e$), defined as the depth corresponding to 1% of surface irradiance; (c) mean light intensity in the water column ($I_m$); and (d) mean temperature of the water column, at the study station during 2005.

Fig. 2: Seasonal variations of concentrations of NO$_3^-$ (filled circles) and NH$_4^+$ (open circles) at the study station during 2005. Because the vertical distribution of the N nutrient was homogeneous, the data were averaged over the following three depths: 0, 20, 40 m.

Fig. 3: NH$_4^+$ uptake rates as a function of light (expressed as a percent of $I_0$) for <10 µm (circles) and >10 µm (square) size fractions of phytoplankton. Rates were determined in the presence of saturated levels of NH$_4^+$. The filled symbols represent the rates collected from a population at 50% of $I_0$, and the open symbols are those collected from a population at 1% of
Lines are fit iteratively to the data according to the multi-parameter formulation as described in the main text.

Fig. 4: NO$_3^-$ uptake rates as a function of irradiance (expressed as a percent of $I_0$) for <10 µm (circles) and >10 µm (square) size fractions of phytoplankton. Rates were determined in the presence of saturated levels of NO$_3^-$. The filled symbols represent the rates collected from a population at 50% of $I_0$, and the open symbols are those collected from a population at 1% of $I_0$. Lines are fit iteratively to the data according to the multi-parameter formulation as described in the main text.

Fig. 5: Comparison between the kinetic parameters of NH$_4^+$ and NO$_3^-$ uptake for the < 10 µm size fraction (a) $V_{max}$, (b) $V_d$, (c) $K_{LT}$, and (d) $E_{opt}$. Values for $V_{max}$ and $V_d$ are in units of h$^{-1}$, and $K_{LT}$ and $E_{opt}$ are in units of µmol photons m$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$. Presented data are the mean of the kinetic parameters at 50% and 1% of $I_0$. Horizontal and vertical bars represent the standard deviation. The solid lines represent the 1/1 ratio.

Fig. 6: Comparison between the kinetic parameters of NH$_4^+$ and NO$_3^-$ uptake for the > 10 µm size fraction (a) $V_{max}$, (b) $V_d$, (c) $K_{LT}$, and (d) $E_{opt}$. Values for $V_{max}$ and $V_d$ are in units of h$^{-1}$, and $K_{LT}$ and $E_{opt}$ are in units of µmol photons m$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$. Presented data are the mean of kinetic parameters at 50% and 1% of $I_0$. Horizontal and vertical bars represent the standard deviation. The solid lines represent the 1/1 ratio.

Fig. 7: Comparison between the mean light available to the cells ($I_m$) and the light needed to reach the maximal N uptake ($E_{opt}$), when (a) NH$_4^+$ and (b) NO$_3^-$ was the N substrate. The filled symbols represent data for the <10 µm size fraction, and the open symbols those for the
>10 µm size fraction. The $E_{opt}$ values are the means of values obtained at 50% and 1% of $I_0$.

Vertical bars represent the standard deviation. The solid lines represent the 1/1 ratio.

Fig. 8: Comparison between the N uptake rates at $I_m$ ($V_{Im}$) and the total N uptake at $E_{opt}$ ($V_{max}$) when (a) NH$_4^+$ and (b) NO$_3^-$ was the N substrate. The filled symbols represent data for the <10 µm size fraction, and the open symbols those for the >10 µm size fraction. Presented data are the mean of parameters at 50% and 1% of $I_0$. Horizontal and vertical bars represent the standard deviation. The solid lines represent the 1/1 ratio.

Fig. 9: Comparison between the NO$_3^-$ and NH$_4^+$ uptake rates at $I_m$. The filled symbols represent data for the <10 µm size fraction, and the open symbols those for the >10 µm size fraction. Presented data are the mean of $V_{Im}$ at 50% and 1% of $I_0$. Horizontal and vertical bars represent the standard deviation. The solid line represents the 1/1 ratio.

Fig. 10: Comparison between the N uptake rates in <10 µm and in >10 µm size fractions at $I_m$. The filled symbols represent data where NO$_3^-$ was the N substrate, and the open symbols those where NH$_4^+$ was the N substrate. Presented data are the mean of $V_{Im}$ at 50% and 1% of $I_0$. Horizontal and vertical bars represent the standard deviation. The solid line represents the 1/1 ratio.
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