

Level Shifter Signal Conditioning Circuit Design for 3-electrode Cell Portable Redox Sensor

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Abstract—This paper presents the effect of level shifter signal conditioning circuits in a low-cost portable potentiostat, implemented by combining several circuit modules and controlled by Advanced RISC Machines Cortex processor. Two architectures of level shifter modules are simulated: Non-inverting Summing Amplifier and Inverting Summing Amplifier. The main objective is to improve signal detection readability by widening the input voltage signal processing and increasing the amplitude range of the sensor output signal before the analog to digital signal conversion. The potential amplitude range of redox reaction captured by trans-impedance module at -3 V to 3 V is reduced by 50%. Then, the output voltage is converted by analog digital converter to be interfaced with microcontroller for Differential Pulse Voltammetry current properties. The designed potentiostat has a current readout range of $\pm 500\text{ mA}$ and is validated to be at 15% difference with the standard laboratory potentiostat.

Index Terms—Differential Pulse Voltammetry, level shifter, potentiostat, signal conditioning, redox current.

I. INTRODUCTION

ELECTROCHEMICAL sensors and biosensing allows the versatility of electrochemical methods to provide a low cost, real-time and in-situ investigation in chemical composition [1]. The characterization investigation is done by the assistance of electrochemical instrumentation known as a potentiostat. Potentiostats are widely used such as in air quality monitoring, food and beverage safety analysis, and biomedical field [2]–[11]. The functionalities of existing potentiostat equipment depends on the cost whereas a low-cost potentiometric only provided a basic specification of potentiometric [12].

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The study on low-cost potentiostats have been done extensively. There are many studies done on low-cost potentiostats [13]–[17]. Most of the studies focuses on minimal specification potentiostat design, architecture allowing construction using off-shelf components [6]. Point-of-Care devices is an example of low-cost potentiostat being widely used under current health scenarios. Nevertheless, most of the development of point-of-care devices focuses on chemical compounds [18]–[22].

Typically, a basic potentiostat circuit consists of 3 amplifiers as shown in Fig 1.

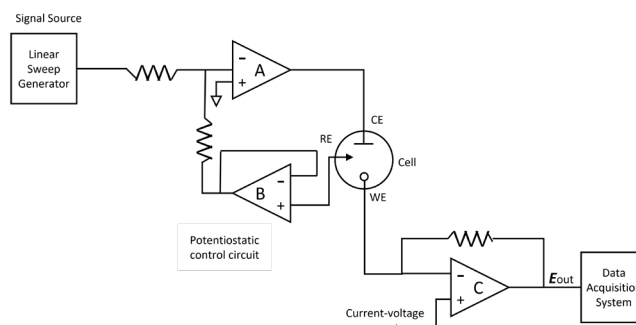


Fig. 1. Basic potentiostat circuit [23]

These amplifiers configuration is used to force current flow from counter electrode (CE) to working electrode (WE) and avoid drawback current from reference electrode (RE). Then, the resulting current is recorded by data acquisition system through analog digital converter (ADC) which is the main module in it. ADC is used to interface the microcontrollers with the transimpedance to establish the differential pulse voltammetry (DPV) [19]–[22].

The resulting current which also known as redox current is small and noisy [24], [25]. It is important to retain the originality of measured signal especially when deal with low and noisy signal. Hence, researchers had proposed several signal conditioning circuit module between transimpedance and ADC stage [1], [21], [26]–[28]. In addition the implementation on signal conditioning methods before the digital stage also helps to increase the readout SNR at the cost of limited input current range due to the amplifier swing [29]. Thus, it is important to consider appropriate signal conditioning circuit in designing a portable potentiostat.

The focus of this paper is on level shifter signal conditioning method for low-cost portable potentiostat circuit design based on 32-bit microcontroller. In this research work, the potentiostat design consists of a control amplifier, trans-impedance amplifier, and level shifter amplifier module that is controlled by MCU. MCU is used to implement the electrochemical analytical DPV method to sense the redox current at WE in Potassium Ferricyanide, $K_3[Fe(CN)_6]$ solution. The measured current at the WE is converted to the voltage at the trans-impedance module. The conversion voltage contains negative sign which gives readability limitation to ADC. At the same time, it will lead to signal loss since ADC only read positive voltage values. Thus, level shifter signal conditioning method

is used to straighten out these problems. The designed level shifter is expected to attenuate the amplitude of voltage swing in range of 0 to 3.3 V. Therefore the ADC will be able to read the signal from trans-impedance amplifier without truncated.

II. RESEARCH MEHODOLOGY

When Electrochemical cell, analog processing, and digital processing are the three (3) major components of 3 - electrode cell sensing systems used in this potentiostat design. The design of the system and the output waveform for each modules is illustrated in Fig. 2.

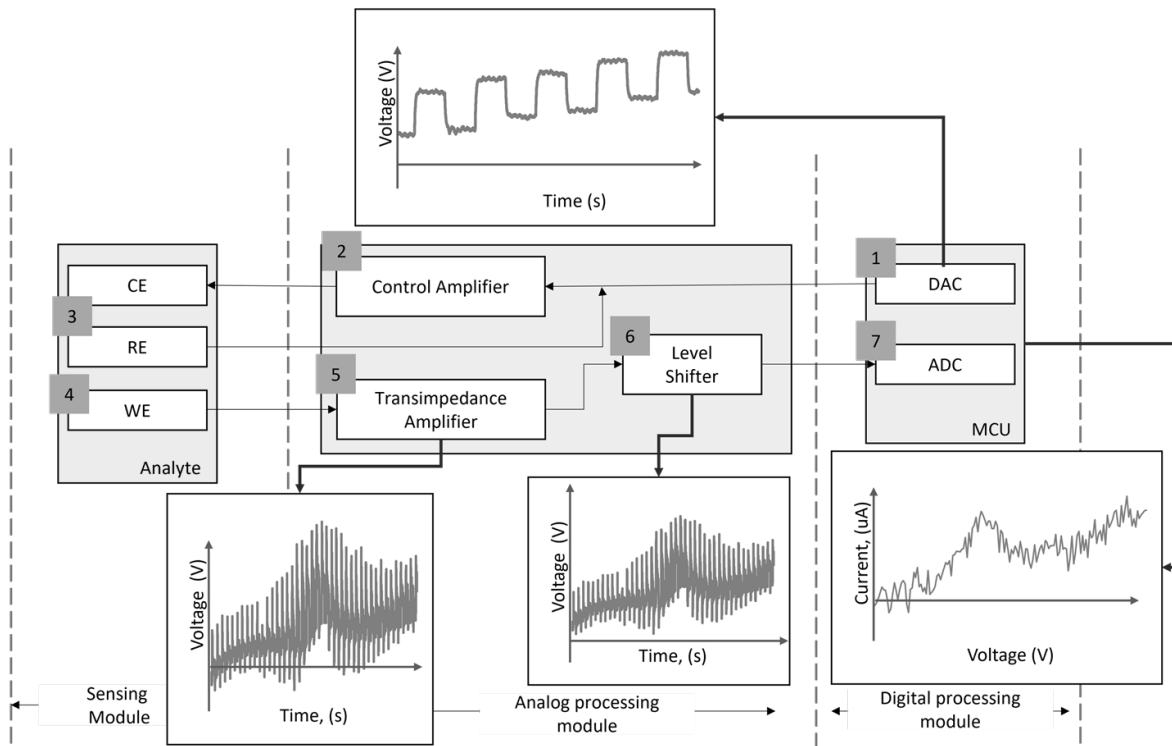


Fig. 2. 3-electrode cell sensing system

A. Sensing Module

In the proposed potentiostat, the sensing module was used to detect the redox reaction. The sensing module consisted of an electrochemical setup that includes electrodes and also an analyte. Three (3) types of electrodes which were counter electrode (CE), reference electrode (RE), and the working electrode (WE) were used in the sensing module. Platinum material with length and diameter of 5.7 and 0.055 cm was used as CE. While, silver/silver chloride (Ag/AgCl) with dimension of 0.078 and 0.006 cm of length and diameter was used as RE. 195 mV of reference potential was provided by RE with an internal solution of 3M NaCl. Meanwhile for WE, a bare gold material with rectangle dimension of 2 x 1 x 0.01 cm was used. 10 mM of $K_3[Fe(CN)_6]$ was used as an analyte sample in this work

B. Analog Processing Module

Several circuitries in the analog processing module was used to control and measure the redox reaction. Each of the modules required the used of op-amp. In this work, AD744JN op-amp type was used. Fig.3 shows the control amplifier circuit which was used in this module to rule the potential applied from Digital Analog Converter (DAC).

Control amplifier consists of two op-amp (OA_1 , OA_2), and two resistors (R_1 , R_2) values 10 k Ω was used in this work. The negative feedback input (V^-) of OA_1 was swept by a staircase input voltage (V_{in}) received from DAC. The change of V_{in} will affected the voltage potential of WE.

OA_1 was employed to drive the current between CE and WE. CE was utilised to complete the electric circuit, supplying current as well as any voltage required to drive the reaction at

the WE. The solution voltage potential at WE was measured through calculating the potential difference between RE and WE.

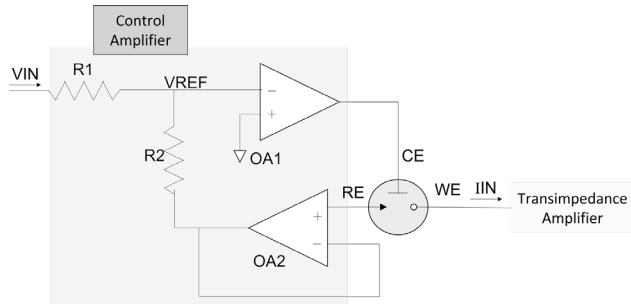


Fig. 3. Control Amplifier Module

While OA₂ was used as voltage follower. OA₂ was connected to RE to secure current from flowing back to OA₁. OA₂ is crucial element that plays two roles which are: as a buffer to the output of RE and supply high input impedance of OA₂ respectively.

The potential voltage of OA₁ was kept sufficiently enough to ensure the current flows at the output voltage (V_{out}) OA₁ and WE are equal. Hence, the potential was able to be maintained at the proper point. RE was used as the potential voltage at V⁺ of OA₂ since the absent of RE will caused the interference occurs.

As the control amplifier was functioned, the redox reaction at WE was measured by calculating the current flow through OA₃. The measurement of voltage drops across the feedback resistor, R₃ = 5k Ω as shown in Fig.4 will resulting in OA₃ V_{in} = V_{out} / R₃. This circuit configuration was known as a trans-impedance amplifier and capable to convert current in the range of ± 500 mA.

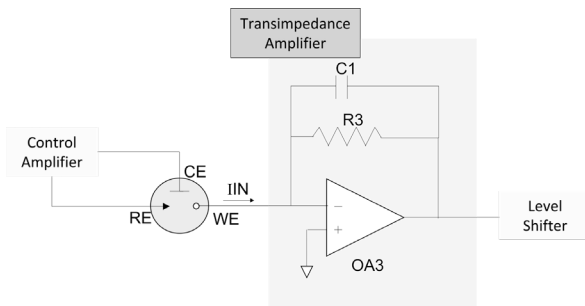


Fig.4. Trans-impedance amplifier module

Due to equipment limitations, trans-impedance amplifier functionality was validated through computer simulation using Multisim software. Input current, I_{in} source was varied from -500 to +500 mA and V_{out} at OA₃ was observed. From the simulation, the trans-impedance module can convert the current to voltage from ± 500 mA to ± 2.80 V.

V_{out} produced by OA₃ was passed to the level shifter module for voltage level modification. The function of level shifter is to convert a voltage signal into a significant range for an ADC either by attenuate or amplify the signal. If a direct connection

(without a level shifter) is made between output of trans-impedance amplifier to the ADC, the output voltage would cause a loss of signal. This is due to the input voltage ADC is between 0 to 3.3 V. Any values within this range is unable to be read by ADC.

Two types of level shifter were designed and tested for 3-electrode cell redox reaction system compatibility purposed. Fig. 5 shows the first level shifter design which is NSA. This module is a combination of voltage divider circuit and non-inverting summing amplifier circuit. The OA₄ V⁺ was connected to voltage divider circuit consist of R₈, R₉ = 20 k Ω , and produced OA₄ V_{out} = 1.65 V which was half of OA₄ V⁺. OA₅ V⁺ were from the voltage drop of OA₄ V_{out} and trans-impedance amplifier V_{out} at R₇ = 5 k Ω and R₆ = 10 k Ω respectively. The OA₅ V⁻ was grounded and connected to R₄ = 5 k Ω and R₅ = 10 k Ω . Hence, the trans-impedance amplifier output was scaled down by 0.5 factors through OA₅ with shifted 1.6 V offset level.

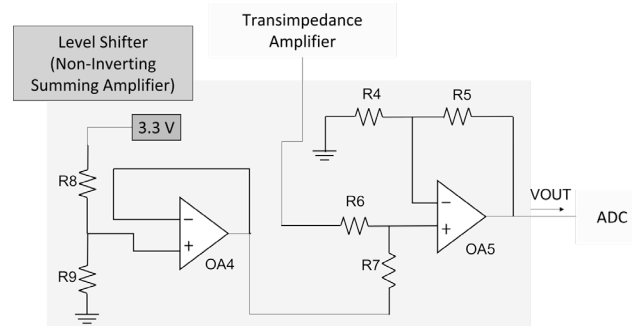


Fig. 5. Non-inverting summing amplifier, NSA

Another level shifter as shown in Fig. 6 namely ISA was designed in this work. OA₄ V_{out} in ISA was similar to the OA₄ in NSA level shifter. V_{out} OA₅ was inverse the V_{in} of it and had gain=1 where R₈ and R₉ are 20 k Ω respectively. OA₆ circuit connections has resulted in amplitude shifting caused by the addition of V_{out} OA₅ and V_{out} trans-impedance amplifier.

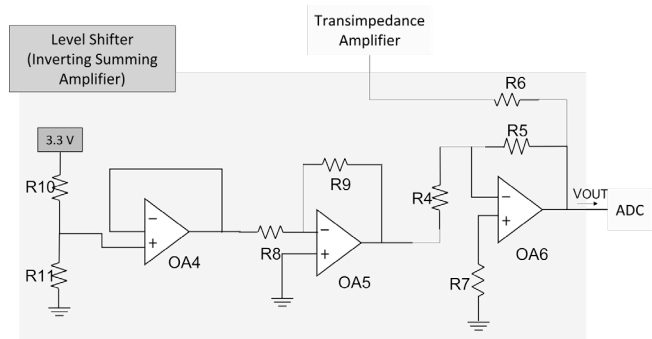


Fig.6. Inverting summing amplifier, ISA

C. Digital Signal Processing Module

Digital processing module is the brain of the system for controlling the analog processing and sensing. This module consists of MCU with built-in DAC and ADC respectively. The MCU was programmed to perform DPV electroanalytical

methods in the developed potentiostat. In this method, the applied potential was in a fixed magnitude and linear staircase pulses. The resulting current sampling was done at the end and beginning of each pulse. The difference between these two current samplings were compared and plotted. Thus, resulting in a DPV voltammogram which consists of peak current.

The implementation of DPV was competent to capture the redox reaction through a sensing module and measure it in the analog signal using analog processing module. Besides, the digital processing module was used for level shifter V_{out} conversion. The signal conversion was an important pre-processing step before the signal was sent to MCU. Here, the

ADC module is responsible for converting the analog V_{out} of the level shifter into a 12-bit digital signal. For every signal conversion, the data was saved in the MCU's memory. This process was repeated until the final voltage reached. Then, the MCU was programmed to recalculate V_{out} from the level shifter and returned it to the original signal by considering all the involved equations in the circuit. The originality of the redox signals was able to be preserved and therefore the result produced was reliable.

The complete details of circuits involved in this 3-electrode cell redox reaction sensing used in this work is summarized as shown in Fig.7.

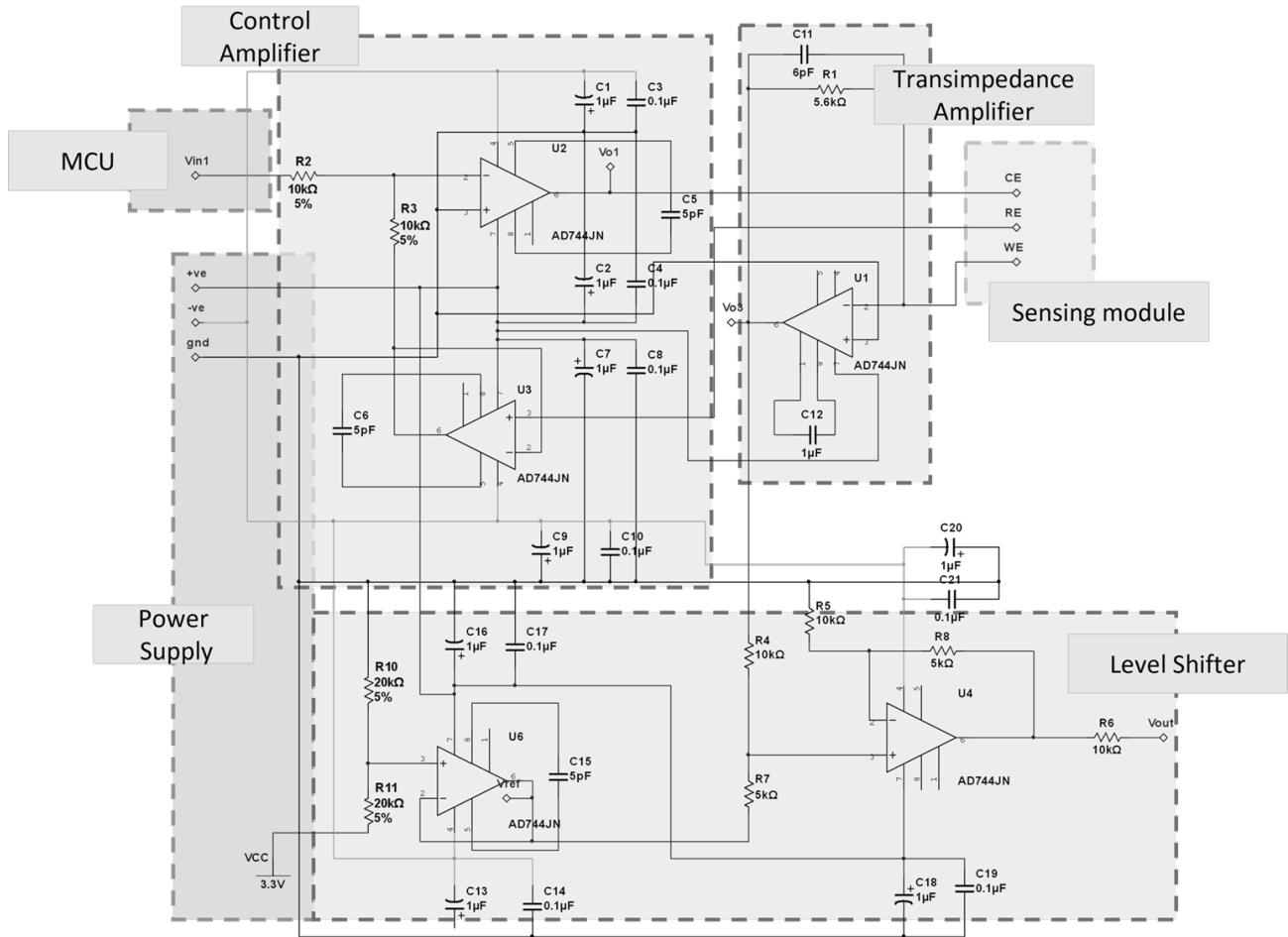


Fig.7. 3-electrode cell redox reaction sensing circuit

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Level Shifter Design Simulation

Fig. 8 shows the comparison of V_{out} from two different types of level shifter design. For both designs, input was set up with peak voltage (V_{peak}) and frequency (f) at 3 V and 1 Hz respectively. Based on Figure 8, the V_{out} for ISA level shifter was shifted to 0.92 V from the original signal while the offset level is was maintained at 0 V. While for NSA level shifter, V_{out} has narrowed down the voltage peak from 3 to 1.65 V. The V_{offset} of NSA level shifter has shifted from 0 to 1.65 V. Based on this result, the NSA level shifter showed an advantage by

providing only positive values for the output as the ADC used in this circuit design only support positive values [30].

The obtained results from level shifter in Fig.8 has been tabulated in Table I. From table I, it can be observed that, the minimum voltage (V_{min}) produced by ISA level shifter has exceeded the acceptable voltage limitation of ADC. Technically, the V_{out} from both designs cannot exceed ADC voltage limitation because it will effect ADC readability and leads to signal loss. Hence, it was concluded that ISA level shifter is less suitable to be used in this 3-electrode redox reaction sensing system.

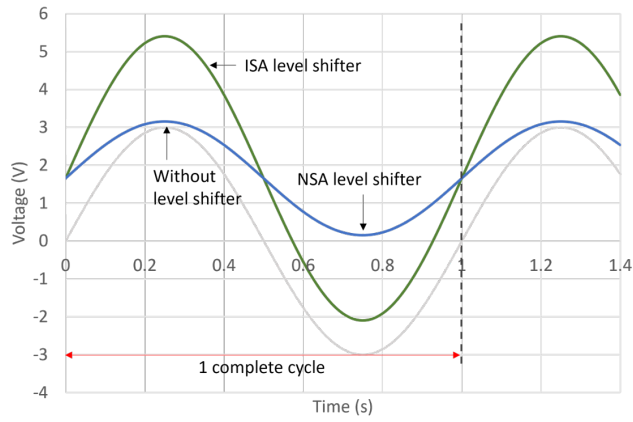


Fig.8. Level shifter design comparison on Vout

TABLE I

SUMMARIZED DATA FOR EACH DESIGN FROM FUNCTION GENERATOR MEASUREMENT

Parameter	V_{max} (V)	V_{min} (V)	V_{pp} (V)	Offset (V)
Input (Function Generator)	3.0	-3.0	6.0	0
ADC	3.3	0	-	-
ISA	5.4	-2.0	7.0	0
NSA	3.0	0	3.0	1.65

Besides that, it also can be observed that the voltage output produced by NSA level shifter gives V_{min} of 0 V same as ADC V_{min} with offset at 1.65 V. Meanwhile, ISA level shifter produced V_{min} of -2.0 V at 0 V offset level. For both designs, ISA level shifter able to amplify the input voltage signal by 1 V larger than original voltage signal while NSA level shifter reduces the voltage half of original voltage signal. By comparing both voltages output produces by NSA and ISA level shifter, it can be said that the NSA level shifter was more suitable for 3-electrode cell redox reaction sensing system because NSA level shifter was able to provide the nearest range of V_{max} and V_{min} compatible to ADC specification.

In order to study the effect of resistor values on the output voltage of level shifter, resistance R_4 and R_6 value is varied from 3.3 to 16 k Ω as shown in Fig.9. While R_5 and R_7 is fixed to 5 k Ω . Based on ADC datasheet, the V_{out} from the level shifter which will be V_{in} to ADC should be in positive sign value [30]. From the Fig 9, it can be seen that 3.3 k Ω resistance value was saturated at 1st positive cycle and give the negative output voltage at 2nd cycle respectively. While at 5 and 7 k Ω output signal, it can be seen that at 2nd negative cycle of input voltage, the obtained output voltages are ~1.5 and ~0.5 V respectively. Based on the result, the increment value of resistance will narrow down the peak-to-peak output voltage scale.

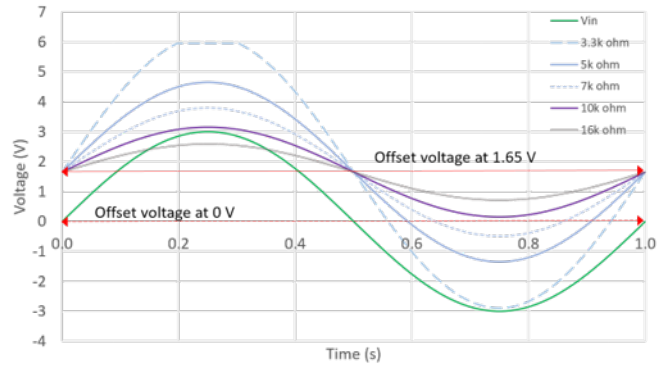


Fig. 9. Effect of input resistance values to the amplitude and offset of output voltage

The effect of resistance values on V_{max} , V_{min} , A_v and V_{pp} were observed and plotted as shown in Fig.10. From Fig.10 resistance value of R_4 and R_6 was inversely proportional to the V_{out} , voltage gain (A_v), and $V_{peak-peak}$ (V_{pp}) respectively. A higher resistance value will give a lower V_{out} . Therefore, based on the results obtained in Fig 9 and 10, 10 k Ω resistor shows the excellent results due to optimum potential value and V_{pp} saturated of level shifter obtained using 10 k Ω resistor was nearest to the ADC limitation value (0 V – 3.3V).

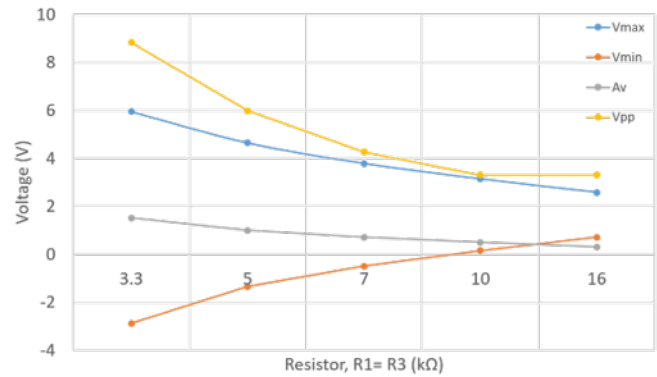


Fig.10. Effect of input resistance values to the V_{max} , V_{min} , A_v and V_{pp}

B. Effect of Level Shifter Design to Differential Pulse Voltammetry (DPV)

In this work, the design of level shifter has also been compared to DPV voltammogram as shown in Fig. 11. From Fig. 11, the DPV voltammogram waveform cannot be produced by MCU without a level shifter module. When a level shifter is added to 3-electrode cell redox reaction sensing system oxidation peak of 138 mV occurs at 5.3 s. While the V_{out} obtained from MCU is around 0.1 to 0.8 V. This shows level shifter plays important role in this system by providing signal readability of the sensing module.

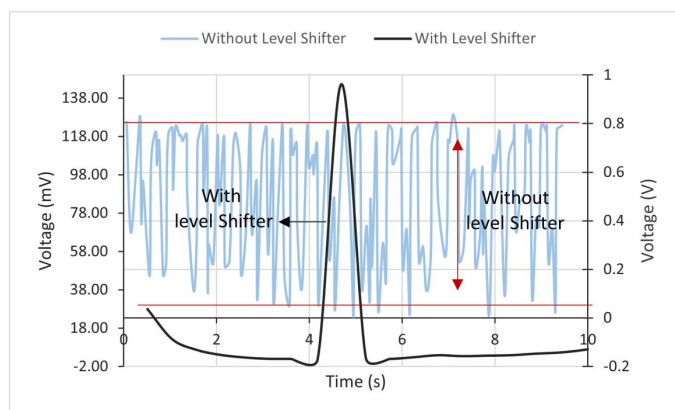


Fig.11. Comparison of Level Shifter effect to the DPV voltammogram

The 3-electrode cell sensing system designed in this work was compared to commercial potentiostat as shown in Fig.12. It can be seen that the corresponding anodic peak current of the $K_3[Fe(CN)_6]$ oxidized at V_{in} at 0.70 V is $81 \mu A$ while for commercial potentiostat anodic peak current occur at $V_{in} = 0.79$ V is $82 \mu A$. Based on this result, the 3-electrode potentiostat design in this work shows only 1.2 % difference compared to commercial potentiostat. Therefore, it can be said that the design potentiostat is comparable to commercial potentiostat.

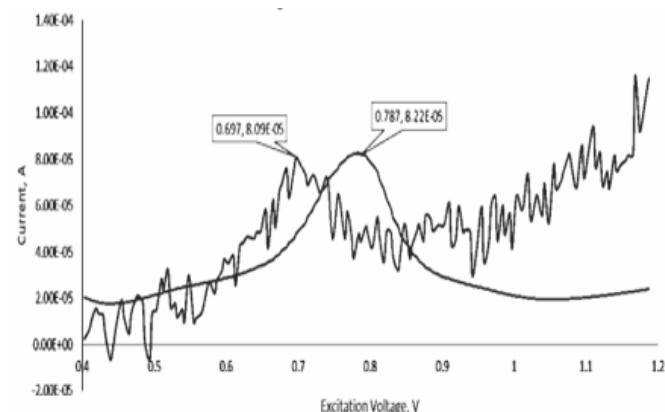


Fig.12. Validation of Differential Pulse Voltammogram for Designed Potentiostat and Commercial Potentiostat

IV. CONCLUSION

The 3-electrode cell potentiostat consisted of 3 main parts: digital, analog, and electrochemical cell parts has been successfully designed. The digital part has the capability to generate a DPV waveform input voltage to the analog part from 0 to 3.3V. The analog part consists of a control amplifier module, trans-impedance module, and a level shifter module respectively. Control amplifier module was a combination of adder and buffer amplifier while the trans-impedance module was a current measurement amplifier. Since ADC cannot accept negative values, 2 types of the level shifter which are non-inverting summing amplifier, NSA, and inverting summing amplifier, ISA were designed and simulated. From the simulation, it was found that the NSA level shifter was more suitable to be used in this system because the voltage produced

was fixed to a positive range. The positive output signal was important because the acceptable input voltage conversion of ADC was in a range between 0 - 3.3 V. Besides that, the NSA level shifter was implemented in the 3-electrode cell redox reaction sensing system. It was found out that without NSA level shifter, the system was unable to produce a DPV voltammogram and give a random value between 0.1 V to 0.8 V. By adding the level shifter, the system gives a $25.925 \mu A$ oxidation peak at a time of 5.3 seconds. The system was then compared to the standard laboratory potentiostat. The result shows a DPV peak current versus voltage difference of 1.58% and 11.00% respectively. As the percentage difference was insignificant, it can be concluded that the level shifter in the 3-electrode cell redox reaction sensing system was functioning well.

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