

Application of fluorescent *in situ* hybridization coupled with tyramide signal amplification (FISH-TSA) to assess eukaryotic picoplankton composition

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ABSTRACT: Photosynthetic picoeukaryotes (phytoplankton cells with a diameter smaller than 2 to 3 μm) contribute significantly to both biomass and primary production in the oligotrophic open ocean and coastal waters, at certain times of the year. The identification of these organisms is difficult because of their small size and simple morphology, therefore hindering detailed ecological studies of their distribution and role. In this paper, we demonstrate the use of oligonucleotide probes specific to algal classes or to lower order taxa in combination with fluorescent *in situ* hybridization and tyramide signal amplification (FISH-TSA) to determine eukaryotic picophytoplankton diversity. Target cells were detected and enumerated using epifluorescence microscopy. The sensitivity of the technique and the specificity of the probes were tested on pure and mixed picoplanktonic strains, as well as on natural samples from the English Channel. In these samples, the community was dominated by cells belonging to the division Chlorophyta. Haptophyta, Bolidophyceae and Pelagophyceae were also detected at low abundance. The FISH-TSA method is readily applicable to the study of picoplankton diversity in natural communities.

KEY WORDS: Fluorescent *in situ* hybridization · Tyramide signal amplification · Picoplankton · Eukaryotes · Coastal waters · Diversity

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INTRODUCTION

Cells smaller than 2 to 3 μm (picoplankton) are important in the marine environment (Li & Platt 1987). The eukaryotic component of the picoplankton has been recognized to contribute significantly to both biomass and primary production in oligotrophic areas of the world's oceans (Campbell et al. 1994, Li 1994) and can also be important in coastal waters (Courties et al. 1994, Campbell et al. 1998). Their small size and simple morphology (numerous picoeukaryotes have converged toward a coccoid form, particularly the photosynthetic ones, e.g. Potter et al. 1997) make their identification difficult and hinder diversity and eco-

logical studies. Today, fewer than 40 picoplanktonic species belonging to 10 algal classes have been described from environmental isolates. The classes Pelagophyceae (Andersen et al. 1993) and Bolidophyceae (Guillou et al. 1999a) have been erected based solely on picoplanktonic species, suggesting that this size class is a reservoir of new taxa. More than 50 yr after the first description of photosynthetic picoeukaryotes in coastal waters (Butcher 1952) and 20 yr after their importance in oceanic waters was established (Johnson & Sieburth 1979), we are still unable to determine the dominant taxonomic groups in the various oceanic environments.

The use of molecular tools is greatly improving our ability to explore natural picoplanktonic communities. Phylogenetic analyses based upon 18S rRNA gene sequences obtained from DNA extracted from natural

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samples permit culture-independent assessments of diversity and indicate that there is a considerable number of yet uncultured species in eukaryotic picoplankton communities (Lopez-Garcia et al. 2001, Moon-van der Staay et al. 2001). The enumeration of specific taxonomic groups and the estimation of their contribution to eukaryotic picoplankton, however, are more difficult. Photosynthetic pigments have been widely used to estimate the contribution of algal classes to total chlorophyll *a* (chl *a*) biomass (Latasa & Bidigare 1998). However, this method is limited for several reasons. First, it cannot resolve diversity below the class level. Second, it is based on the assumption that the relative cellular content of diagnostic pigments is constant for a given algal group. This assumption is invalid because pigment content varies between species, as well as within species. For a given strain, it is also affected by environmental conditions (e.g. Stolte et al. 2000).

Whole cell fluorescent *in situ* hybridization (FISH) with rRNA-targeted nucleic acid probes has been used more and more extensively to detect bacteria (Amann 1995). This method, which combines identification with quantitative determination of cell number, has been successfully applied to complex bacteria communities such as biofilms (Brümmer et al. 2000), marine sediments (Llobet-Brossa et al. 1998) and soils (Ravenschlag et al. 2000). Fluorescent rRNA probes have not been used as widely for eukaryotic phytoplankton (Simon et al. 1995, Scholin et al. 1996). Attempts to use mono-labeled oligonucleotide probes for the study of photosynthetic picoplankton in marine waters have been unsuccessful (Simon et al. 1995) because signal intensity was too low to distinguish labeled cells from the auto-fluorescence of non-target cells and from background fluorescence. A number of signal amplification methods have been tested in recent years. Lim et al. (1993) combined a biotin-avidin system with rRNA probes and FISH to detect and quantify marine protists. Polyribonucleotide probes with multiple labels have been used to visualize and enumerate marine bacteria (Ludwig et al. 1994, DeLong et al. 1999). Schönhuber et al. (1997) described a hybridization method involving tyramide signal amplification (FISH-TSA). This technique appears very attractive since it increases fluorescence intensity 10 to 20 times over that of mono-labeled probes. Using horseradish peroxidase (HRP)-labeled probes and fluorescent tyramide as substrate for the enzyme, Schönhuber et al. (1999) and West et al. (2001) were able to use FISH for the detection and quantification of cyanobacteria both in cultures and in natural samples. In the present study, we adapted this method to eukaryotic picoplankton and we demonstrate its applicability to both cultured strains and natural communities.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Cultures. Four uni-algal strains of nano- and pico-eukaryotes belonging to the Prasinophyceae, Pelagophyceae and Bolidophyceae were selected (Table 1). They were grown in Nalgene flasks at 20°C in K medium (Keller et al. 1987). For hybridization tests, cells were harvested during the mid-exponential phase. In order to estimate the detection limit of 1 target taxa among non-target cells, artificial mixtures were created from pure cultures of *Ostreococcus tauri* (Chrétiennot-Dinet et al. 1995) and *Bolidomonas pacifica* (Guillou et al. 1999a). Eighteen milliliters of each culture was harvested and fixed with 2 ml of 10% paraformaldehyde (PFA) for 1 h (1% PFA final concentration). Cell densities of fixed cultures were estimated using flow cytometry (Marie et al. 1999). Five mixtures of *B. pacifica* and *O. tauri* with 1, 5, 10, 20 and 50% of *B. pacifica* cells, respectively, were prepared. Ten milliliters of these mixtures was filtered onto 0.2 µm Anodisc filters (Whatman). Filters were dehydrated in an ethanol series (50, 80 and 100%, 3 min each) and stored at –80°C until further analysis.

Natural samples. Water samples were collected at 1 m depth, on 3 occasions (July 28, August 9 and August 24, 2000) off Roscoff, France (Stn ASTAN: 48°45' N; 4°00' W) in 5 l Niskin bottles. Water temperature at the time of collection was approximately 15°C. Samples were pre-filtered through 3 µm pore size Nuclepore filters (Whatman) and 180 ml of sea water was fixed with 20 ml of 10% PFA for 1 h. Exceeding this duration resulted in cell loss. Samples were then filtered onto Anodisc filters under 200 mm Hg pressure and dehydrated in an ethanol series (50, 80 and 100%, 3 min each), making sure that the filters never dried between filtrations. Filters were stored at –80°C until further analysis. For flow cytometry analyses, 1.5 ml of 3 µm pre-filtered water was fixed with 1% PFA and 0.1% glutaraldehyde (final concentrations), deep-frozen in liquid nitrogen and stored at –80°C.

Flow cytometry. Total photosynthetic picoeukaryote cell counts were obtained by flow cytometry. Analyses were performed on fixed sea water samples with a FACScan flow cytometer (Becton Dickinson) following Marie et al. (1999). Photosynthetic picoeukaryotes were discriminated from cyanobacteria and enumerated using the Cytowin software (see www.sb-roscoff.fr/Phyto/cyto.html, Vaultot 1989).

Oligonucleotide probes. The probes used were chosen to encompass a range of picoplanktonic divisions and classes (Table 2). The theoretical specificity of the probes was checked on an rRNA database containing more than 14 000 sequences, using the probe match function of the ARB software (see www2.mikro.biologie.tu-muenchen.de/arb/). Oligonucleotide

Table 1. Origin and culture conditions of picoplankton strains tested. RCC: Roscoff Culture Collection

RCC number	Class	Species	Strain	Light ($\mu\text{E m}^{-2} \text{s}^{-1}$)	Cell diameter (μm)	Origin
116	Prasinophyceae	<i>Ostreococcus tauri</i>	OTTH 0595	100	0.8	Thau Lagoon
261	Prasinophyceae	<i>Pseudocourfieldia marina</i>	TAK9801	40	4	Takapoto atoll
205	Bolidophyceae	<i>Bolidomonas pacifica</i>	OLI 31 SE3	100	1.5	Equatorial Pacific
100	Pelagophyceae	<i>Pelagomonas calceolata</i>	CCMP1214	4	2	North Pacific Central gyre

Table 2. Characteristics of oligonucleotide probes used in this study. The bold letters point to the single base change between the NCHLO01 and CHLO01 probes. MW: molecular weight; n: number of bases

Probe	Sequence (5'→3')	n	%GC	MW (Da)	Target group	Source
EUK1209R	GGG CAT CAC AGA CCT G	16	62.5	5146	Eukaryote	Giovannoni et al. (1988)
NCHLO01	GCT CCA CTC CTG GTG GTC	18	66.7	5773	Non-Chlorophyta	Simon et al. (1995)
CHLO01	GCT CCA CGC CTG GTG GTC	18	62.5	5798	Chlorophyta	Simon et al. (1995)
CHLO02	CTT CGA GCC CCC AAC TTT	18	55	5661	Chlorophyta	Simon et al. (2000)
PRYM02	GGA ATA CGA GTG CCC CTG AC	20	60	6451	Haptophyta	Simon et al. (2000)
PELA01	ACG TCC TTG TTC GAC GCT	18	55	5732	Pelagophyceae	Simon et al. (2000)
BOLI02	TAC CTA GGT ACG CAA ACC	18	50	5743	Bolidophyceae	Guillou et al. (1999b)

probes were purchased with a 5' aminolink (C6) from Interactiva. The probes were then labeled with HRP (Roche Diagnostic Boehringer) according to Urdea et al. (1988) and Amann et al. (1992). CHLO02 was also purchased directly labeled with fluorescein isothiocyanate (FITC) at the 5' terminus and purified by HPLC (Genset) in order to compare the fluorescence intensity conferred by mono-labeled probes to that of HRP-labeled probes.

Fish. The protocol used for *in situ* hybridization with FITC mono-labeled probes was adapted from Amann et al. (1995). Our protocol for *in situ* hybridization with HRP-labeled probes, signal amplification and target cell detection is described by Biegala et al. (2002) and was adapted from Schönhuber et al. (1999). In both cases, dehydrated filter samples were thawed and cut into 12 equal pieces. The filter face that supports the cells was marked with a black pen.

In brief, for hybridization with FITC-labeled probes, filters were covered by 10 μl of 40% formamide hybridization buffer (40% deionized formamide, 0.9 M NaCl, 20 mM Tris-HCl, pH 7.5, 0.01% sodium dodecyl sulfate [SDS]) and 1 μl of oligonucleotide probes (stock at 50 ng μl^{-1}) and incubated at 46°C for 3 h. After 2 successive washing steps of 20 min at 46°C in a wash buffer (56 mM NaCl, 5 mM EDTA, 0.01% SDS, 20 mM Tris-HCl, pH 7.5), the filters were dried before being mounted in antifading reagent (see below). For HRP-labeled probes, the hybridization step was slightly different and an additional signal amplification step was necessary. Ten percent (w:v) blocking reagent

(Roche Diagnostic Boehringer) was added to the hybridization buffer described above, and hybridization and washing steps were conducted at 35 and 37°C, respectively. Samples were then equilibrated in TNT buffer (100 mM Tris-HCl, pH 7.5, 150 mM NaCl, Tween 20) for 15 min at room temperature. TSA (Kit NEN Life Science Products) was performed for 30 min at room temperature in the dark in 10 μl of TSA mix (1:1 dextran sulfate and amplification diluent, 1:50 FITC tyramide with the mixture of dextran sulfate and amplification diluent). Filters were then transferred in 2 successive 5 ml TNT buffer baths at 55°C for 20 min each, in order to stop the enzymatic reaction and to remove dextran sulfate. Cells were briefly rinsed in 5 ml of distilled water and counterstained with 4',6-diamidino-2-phenylindole (DAPI) at 5 $\mu\text{g ml}^{-1}$ during 7 min. Filters were finally rinsed in distilled water for 10 min and dried on a slide. Both the filters hybridized with mono-labeled probes and HRP-labeled probes were mounted in antifading reagent AF3 (Citifluor), and the coverslip was fixed to the slide with nail varnish to prevent evaporation of Citifluor. Slides could be stored in the dark at 4°C for 2 wk without significant loss of fluorescence.

Epifluorescence microscopy and image acquisition. The hybridized and DAPI-stained filters were observed with an Olympus BH-2 epifluorescence microscope (Olympus Optical) equipped with a mercury light source and a 40 \times UV fluorescence objective. Excitation/emission filters were 360/420 for DAPI and 490/515 for FITC. For each natural sample, cells in 10

randomly chosen microscopic fields were visually counted. For probes with a broad taxonomic specificity (e.g. EUK1209R), more than 2000 cells were counted. Images were acquired with an RT-Slider Spot cooled charge coupled device (CCD) digital camera (Diagnostic Instruments). For images of cells in culture, the exposure time and gain were constant for a given species. These values were determined by automatic exposure with the probe specific for the species (e.g. PELA01 for *Pelagomonas* sp.) and then used for the other probes. Images of natural samples were acquired using automatic exposure.

RESULTS

The EUK1209R probe was used in this study as a general eukaryotic probe. However, some species and entire clades such as the Rhodophyta division, as well as some Chlorophyta orders such as the Prasiolales and Dasycladales, which are all probably underrepresented in the picoplankton as suggested by environmental 18S rDNA clone libraries (Lopez-Garcia et al. 2001, Moon-van der Staay et al. 2001), are not targeted by this probe. The CHLO01 and NCHLO01 probes, which differ from each other by a single nucleotide, were initially designed to target the division Chlorophyta and all non-Chlorophyta algae, respectively (Simon et al. 1995). However, our current database search revealed that the CHLO01 probe does not recognize the Pseudoscourfieldiales and Pyramimonadales clades, nor the Prasiolales and Zygnematophyceae, all of which are members of the division Chlorophyta, and this probe cross-hybridizes to several taxa within the Cryptophyceae, Pavlovales and Apicomplexa. Conversely, the NCHLO01 probe recognizes some Chlorophyta taxa such as the Pseudoscourfieldiales or the Pyramimonadales, but not the Rhodophyta, some Cryptophyceae, numerous Apicomplexa and even 1 *Chrysochromulina* clade within Haptophyta. When used in combination, and since they are complementary to each other, the CHLO01 and NCHLO01 probes target most eukaryotic sequences of the 18S rRNA gene database. The probe CHLO02, which was designed more recently (Simon et al. 2000), targets more Chlorophyta species than CHLO01 and has the advantage of not targeting any non-Chlorophyta taxa. The probes PRYM02, PELA01 and BOLI02 are specific for the division or the class they target (Haptophyta, Pelagophyceae, Bolidophyceae).

In order to test the specificity and the sensitivity of FISH-TSA for the detection and identification of picoplanktonic algae, we hybridized cultures of *Pseudoscourfieldia marina*, *Pelagomonas calceolata* and *Bolidomonas pacifica* with the 4 HRP-labeled

probes EUK1209R, CHLO01, PELA01 and BOLI02 (Fig. 1). Target species displayed a very bright fluorescence signal, while non-target species showed only a faint fluorescence. For a given probe, the fluorescence intensity of target species was 25 times higher than that of non-target species. Using DAPI counterstaining, we could verify that for a given probe, every target cell was labeled (see Fig. 1 for an example with *B. pacifica*). For all hybridizations, filter fluorescence background and cell auto-fluorescence were very weak and roughly equivalent to those of cells labeled with non-target probes. The signal conferred by HRP-labeled probes is much stronger than that by fluorescein mono-labeled oligonucleotides, as demonstrated for *P. marina* (Fig. 2), *B. pacifica* and *P. calceolata* (data not shown).

The aim of this study was not only to detect a given taxon within a complex community but also to estimate the abundance of the target organisms. As a first test, we analyzed artificial mixtures of 2 picoplanktonic species (*Bolidomonas pacifica* and *Ostreococcus tauri*). These cells were hybridized by FISH-TSA with the BOLI02 and CHLO01 probes (Table 2). Labeled cells were enumerated under epifluorescence microscopy. The fraction of cells hybridized with a given probe (e.g. BOLI02) corresponded very well with the theoretical fraction of cells belonging to the target taxon as determined by flow cytometry before mixing both species (Fig. 3). This was true for all mixtures including those where targeted cell numbers represented as little as 1% of the total population.

Given the improved sensitivity of this detection and identification system, the next step was to test it on complex communities from coastal sea waters. The picophytoplankton community in the English Channel, off Roscoff, includes *Synechococcus* sp. cyanobacteria and picoeukaryotes. In samples collected during the summer, photosynthetic picoeukaryote cell densities determined by flow cytometry ranged between 4293 and 5627 cell ml⁻¹ (Table 3). Using HRP-labeled probes and FISH-TSA combined with epifluorescence microscopy, we were able to detect and enumerate the cells belonging to every group targeted (Fig. 4). The fluorescence of labeled cells was very strong and background fluorescence was very low, as observed for cultures. The density of picoeukaryotic (both autotrophic and heterotrophic) cells hybridized by either the probe CHLO01 or the probe NCHLO01 ranged between 4234 and 5291 cell ml⁻¹ (Table 3). Comparatively, the density of cells labeled by the EUK1209R probes was slightly lower. The use of probes targeting lower taxonomic levels of primarily photosynthetic algae in the divisions Chlorophyta (probe CHLO02) and Haptophyta (probe PRYM02), and the classes Pelagophyceae (probe PELA01) and

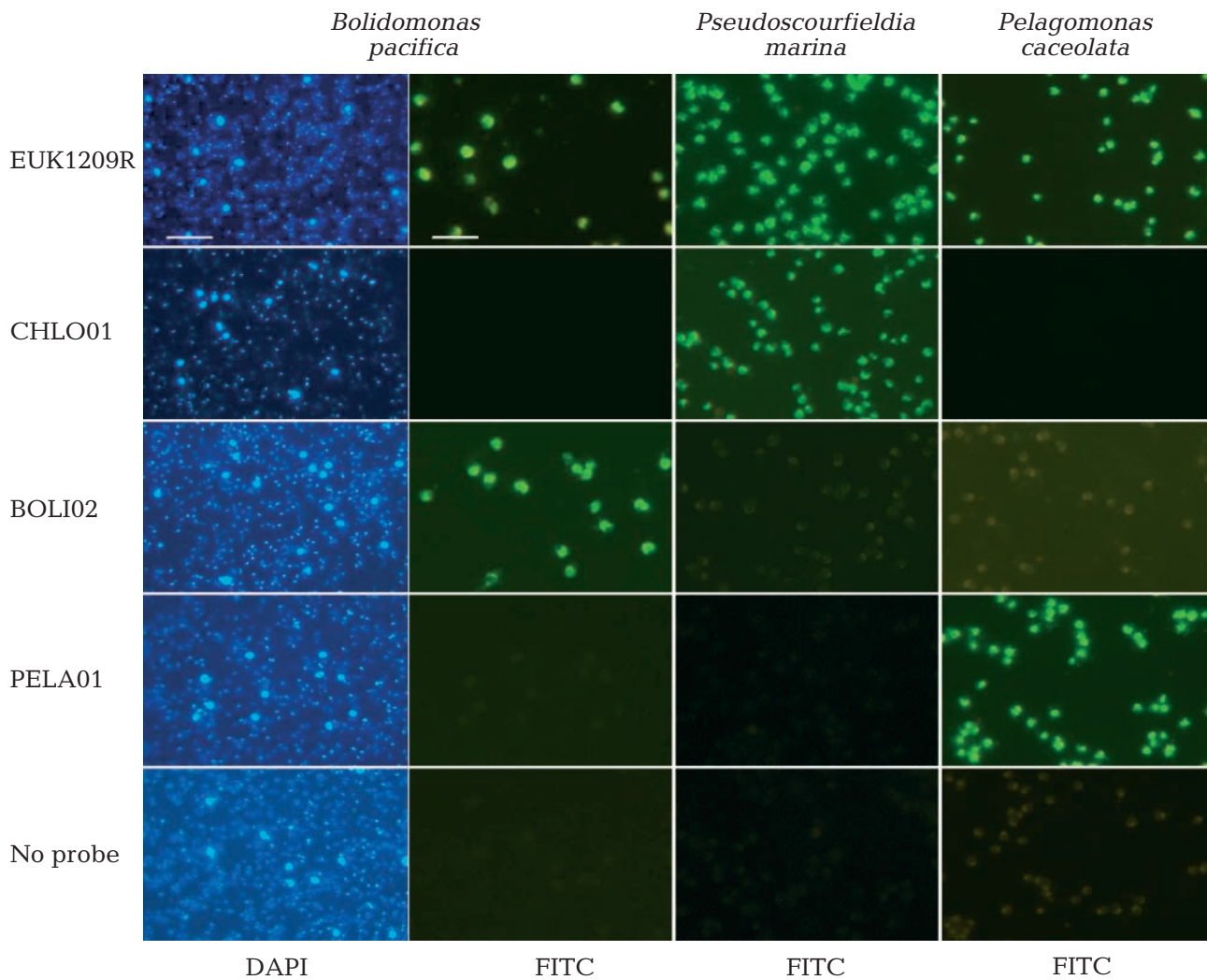


Fig. 1. Epifluorescence microscopy. Picoplanktonic isolates hybridized with taxa-specific probes. All samples were counterstained with 4',6-diamidino-2-phenylindole (DAPI), but only results obtained for *Bolidomonas pacifica* are shown. Scale bar = 10 μ m. FITC: fluorescein isothiocyanate

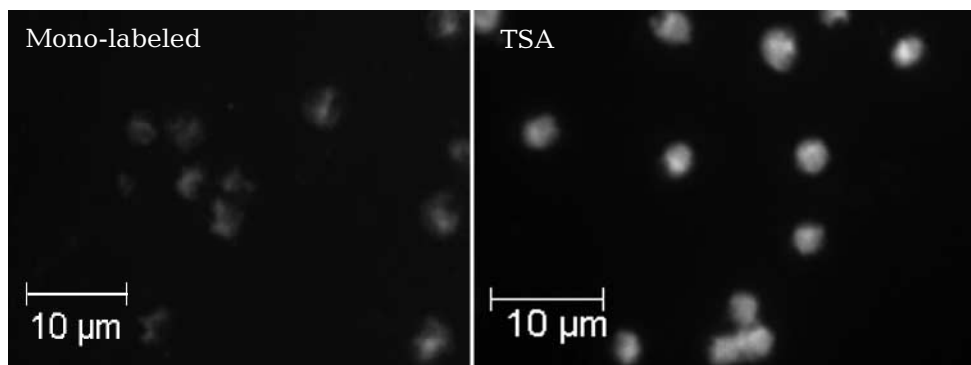


Fig. 2. Epifluorescence microscopy. *Pseudosourfieldia marina* hybridized with the CHLO02 probe either mono-labeled (left) or horseradish peroxidase (HRP)-labeled (right) revealed by tyramide signal amplification (TSA). Exposure time for mono-labeled probe (left) was 17.5 times longer than for TSA (right)

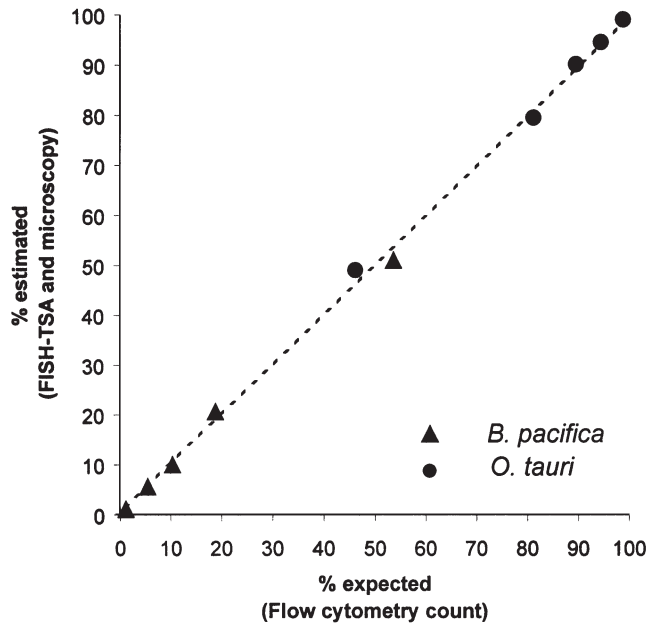


Fig. 3. Percentages of *Bolidomonas pacifica* and *Ostreococcus tauri* in an artificial mixture. Flow cytometry counts were obtained before mixing both species while microscopic counts were obtained from the mixed culture, after hybridization with the probes BOLI01 (specific for the genus *Bolidomonas*) and CHLO01 (specific for the Chlorophyta and targeting *Ostreococcus tauri*). The straight line corresponds to a 1:1 relationship. FISH: fluorescent *in situ* hybridization

Bolidophyceae (probe BOLI02) allowed the assessment of the contribution of specific groups. The CHLO02 probe targeted over 57% of the eukaryotes detected by the sum of CHLO01 + NCHLO01 (Table 3). In contrast, only a small fraction of cells were labeled by the class specific probes PRYM02, PELA01 and BOLI02 (Table 3).

DISCUSSION

The combination of HRP-labeled oligonucleotide probes and of the substrate fluorescein-tyramide has been used for the detection of cyanobacteria that possess strong background auto-fluorescence (Schönhuber et al. 1999, West et al. 2001). Intense and homogeneous fluorescence labeling of the target cells was achieved for these prokaryotic organisms provided that cells were permeabilized with lysozyme before hybridization. In the present study, this detection system (FISH-TSA) intensely labeled photosynthetic picoeukaryotic isolates (Fig. 1). TSA overcomes the problems linked to the low fluorescence levels from mono-labeled probes (Fig. 2). Target cells were easily detected and enumerated under epifluorescence microscopy provided that the following precautions were carefully observed. First, the fixation step should not exceed 1 h, beyond which there is significant cell loss (flow cytometry analyses of fresh vs PFA-fixed samples indicate 11, 30 and 45% of cells lost after 1, 5 and 24 h of fixation, respectively). The inadequacy of PFA to fix picoplankton cells has been recognized for quite a long time, and current protocols used for flow cytometry recommend the combined use of glutaraldehyde at 0.1% final concentration (Marie et al. 1999). However, the latter fixative is not compatible with FISH (Marie et al. 2000). Second, in order to achieve an intense labeling of all target cells, the filter must always remain wet during the filtration and dehydration steps.

Enzymatic permeabilization was not necessary to allow the penetration of the relatively large HRP molecule (molecular weight [MW] 40 000) into the picoeukaryote species tested. Indeed, the cell wall of these species either is lacking (*Bolidomonas pacifica*)

Table 3. Picoplankton abundance in natural samples determined either by flow cytometry or by fluorescent probes and epifluorescence microscopy. FISH-TSA: fluorescent *in situ* hybridization and tyramide signal amplification; dates given as dd/mm/yy

	24/07/00		09/08/00		24/08/00	
	Cell ml ⁻¹	% of CHLO01 + NCHLO01 ^a	Cell ml ⁻¹	% of CHLO01 + NCHLO01 ^a	Cell ml ⁻¹	% of CHLO01 + NCHLO01 ^a
Flow cytometry	5627		5472		4293	
FISH-TSA						
CHLO01 + NCHLO01 ^a	5291	100	5213	100	4234	100
EUK1209R	3673	69	3355	64	4187	99
CHLO01	2926	55	3203	61	2562	61
CHLO02	3899	74	4205	81	2400	57
NCHLO01	2365	45	2010	39	1672	39
PELA01	0	0	8	0.2	94	2
BOLI02	14	0.3	7	0.1	19	0.4
PRYM02	416	8	228	4	456	11

^aSum of the numbers of cells hybridized with CHLO01 and NCHLO01 probes

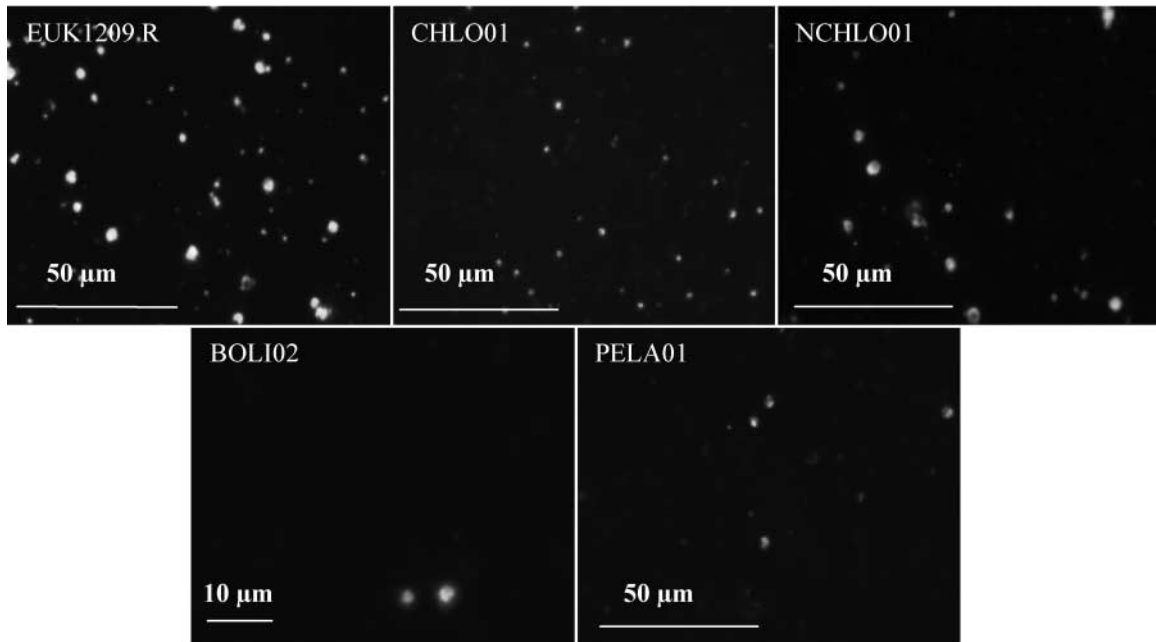


Fig. 4. Epifluorescence microscopy. Picoeukaryote sample from the English Channel in summer 2000. Cells were hybridized with the probes EUK1209R, CHLO01, NCHLO01, BOLI02 and PELA01

or consists of a very thin organic theca (*Pelagomonas calceolata*) or of organic scales (*Pseudoscurfieldia marina*). Yet, for cells with a thicker cell wall such as thecate dinoflagellates, Biegala et al. (2002) had no problem with HRP-labeled probe penetration. However, in the context of another study, we encountered some penetration problems with a few particular species such as *Pycnococcus provasolii* (unpubl.). Extensive tests would be necessary to validate this method on all phytoplankton cell types, and specific protocols will probably be needed for some species. Other parameters may reduce the fluorescence of target cells, in particular low rRNA content linked to low growth rate (Amann et al. 1995, Head et al. 1998). In our experiments, although phytoplankton cells hybridized in the stationary phase are not labeled as uniformly as in the exponential growth phase (data not shown), they are still easily detected. Under the conditions described above, the relative proportion of a target taxon in a mixture can be very accurately estimated (Fig. 3).

In our natural samples from the English Channel, the sum of cells targeted by the probes CHLO01 and NCHLO01, which are complementary to each other, was higher than the number of cells targeted by probe EUK1209R. Surprisingly, database matches revealed that EUK1209R targets more 18S sequences (3269) than the combination of CHLO01 + NCHLO01 (2305). However, the 18S database is not restricted to

picoplankton, and conversely many taxa from the picoplankton appear to correspond to novel lineages not yet represented in the databases (Lopez-Garcia et al. 2001, Moon-van der Staay et al. 2001). Therefore the combination of CHLO01 + NCHLO01 may, in reality, target more picoplankton species than EUK1209R. In addition, studies by Fuchs et al. (1998) on *in situ* accessibility of 16S rRNA for fluorescently labeled oligonucleotide probes suggest that the rRNA secondary structure could be more favorable for hybridization with the CHLO01 and NCHLO01 probes than with EUK1209R: CHLO01 + NCHLO01 and EUK1209R probes bind with regions of the rRNA molecule corresponding to Classes III and V, respectively, with Class I giving the brightest fluorescence and Class VI the lowest (Fuchs et al. 1998). Therefore some cells, although targeted by EUK1209R, could fluoresce very weakly and not be detected. One solution to circumvent this problem could be the use of helper probes that have been used to open inaccessible rRNA regions for FISH in bacteria and to increase the fluorescence signal (Fuchs et al. 2000). Our data therefore suggest that the combination of CHLO01 + NCHLO01 may be more adequate than EUK1209R to obtain total eukaryote counts in picoplankton samples.

The number of cells detected using either the probe EUK1209R or the combination of probes CHLO01 + NCHLO01 was, however, lower than the number of

photosynthetic cells detected by flow cytometry (Table 3). This latter estimate (at about 5000 cells ml⁻¹) fell into the range previously observed in the English Channel off Roscoff (1000 to 25 000 cells ml⁻¹ over the year, Sournia & Birrien 1995, Vaillot & Marie unpubl.). This discrepancy is surprising since the probe EUK1209R and the combination of probes CHLO01 and NCHLO01 target both photosynthetic and non-photosynthetic eukaryotic taxa and therefore should provide higher cell numbers than flow cytometry. Several hypotheses can explain these results. One source of the discrepancy might be errors in counting. However, the standard deviation for microscopic counts was about 6% for the more general probes and therefore cannot explain this discrepancy. Second, heterotrophic cells may not contribute significantly to the picoplanktonic community. However, in general, heterotrophic taxa make up a sizable fraction of eukaryotic picoplankton (e.g. 18 to 38% in Andersen et al. 1996). Moreover, clone libraries established from Roscoff picoplanktonic samples yielded a large number of 18S rRNA sequences affiliated with heterotrophic taxa (K. R. Romari unpubl.). Third, some cells may be destroyed during fixation or during the treatments associated with FISH (ethanol series and detergents) and some taxa may be impermeable to the HRP-labeled probes (see above). Fourth, some picoeukaryote taxa present in abundance at the station sampled may not be labeled (or only weakly) by the probes used (see above). These last 2 reasons probably explain most of the discrepancy observed.

Among the cells recognized by the probes used on natural samples, those belonging to the division Chlorophyta dominated the coastal eukaryotic picoplankton in summer (2400 to 4205 cells ml⁻¹ targeted by the probe CHLO02). This is in agreement with historical phytoplankton pigment data at this coastal site (Klein & Sournia 1987) and with more recent data showing the dominance of chl *b* in the <3 µm size fraction (M. L. Latasa unpubl.). In addition, this concurs with the large number of sequences attributed to members of the class Prasinophyceae (division Chlorophyta) retrieved from sea water samples in total extracted DNA (K. R. Romari unpubl.). Picoeukaryotic cells belonging to other groups targeted by the NCHLO01 probe are also abundant (1672 to 2365 cells ml⁻¹). Among these cells, the division Haptophyta is the most abundant group detected (4 to 11% of the sum of NCHLO01 + CHLO01 targeted cells). Only very few cells (<1%) were detected with the probe targeting the Pelagophyceae, assumed to be important in marine waters (Andersen et al. 1996). The presence of Bolidophyceae in coastal waters was unexpected since

members of this class have been isolated to date only from oligotrophic marine waters of the Pacific and the Mediterranean Sea (Guillou et al. 1999a,b). The 3 probes, PRYM02, PELA01 and BOLI02, used in this study targeted only 34% of non-Chlorophyta cells, suggesting that a large fraction of cells are composed of non-targeted groups such as the Chrysophyceae and the Cryptophyceae or of unknown organisms such as those from the new Alveolata and Stramenopile lineages identified in clone libraries (Lopez-Garcia et al. 2001, Moon-van der Staay et al. 2001).

If FISH-TSA appears to date as the most appropriate method to directly combine identification and quantification of cells from a complex picophytoplankton community, it is critical to increase considerably the number of available 18S rRNA sequences in databases. This will allow determination, *in silico*, of probe specificity, particularly for those probes that were designed some years ago when there were still a limited number of 18S rRNA sequences available (e.g. EUK1209R, CHLO01 and NCHLO01). Ideally, for general probes such as eukaryotic probes or probes targeting division taxa, the simultaneous use of 2 or 3 probes appears to be the best way to assess the abundance of the corresponding group in a natural sample (Amann & Ludwig 2000).

Phytoplankton ecology has relied heavily on approaches that were developed more than a decade ago, such as flow cytometry (Olson et al. 1985) or HPLC pigment analysis (Gieskes & Kraay 1983). Clearly, it should extensively adopt molecular approaches such as FISH or gene cloning that have proved to be useful for the study of the diversity and the role of oceanic bacteria (Giovannoni et al. 1990, Fuhrman et al. 1992, Béja et al. 2000). An additional advantage of these methods is that they also target heterotrophic eukaryotes for which, until now, it was only possible to estimate total abundance with stains such as DAPI or primulin. Indeed, virtually no information is available on the taxonomic composition of this compartment. The combination of FISH with techniques such micro-autoradiography (Ouverney & Fuhrman 1999) should be very useful to understand more precisely the role of specific heterotrophic taxa in the microbial loop.

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