Highly Efficient Synthesis of Licochalcone E through Water-Accelerated [3,3]-Sigmatropic Rearrangement of Allyl Aryl Ether

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Received November 23, 2010, Accepted January 4, 2011

Key Words: Licochalcone E, Claisen-Schmidt condensation, Water-accelerated [3,3]-sigmatropic rearrangement, Claisen rearrangement, Co-solvent system

Retrochalcones (licochalcones A-E, echinatin) were isolated and characterized from the roots of oriental herb, G. inflata. They are reported to have various biological activities; antitumor, anti-inflammatory, vascular, cytotoxic, anti-proliferative, inhibitor of topoisomerase I, protein tyrosinase phosphatase 1B etc. Among these, licochalcone E (Fig. 1) gets drawing attentions due to its promising biological activities (antitumor, vasorelaxant, anti-inflammatory, cytotoxic, inhibitor of topoisomerase I, protein tyrosine phosphatase 1B etc). But because of the low isolated yield (5 mg from 1 Kg dried G. inflata) and low yield producing current multi-step synthesis, growing needs were generated for developing new synthetic route.

Several syntheses of licochalcone E (4) were reported. Cheon et al. reported the first enantioselective total synthesis of this natural product, and also determined the absolute configuration of the asymmetric center of C1" carbon. But their synthesis was so long that it looks tedious (21 steps, overall 5% yield). Recently, Chinese group reported total synthesis of this molecule via abnormal induced Claisen rearrangement reaction as a key step (Scheme 1). It is well known that the Claisen rearrangement of allyl ethers which have γ-alkyl substituent is often complicated by the occurrence of abnormal rearrangement leading to structural isomerization of the migrating group. They exploited this phenomenon starting from 4-hydroxy-2-methoxybenzaldehyde (1). Allylation (86%) at the 4-position of the phenyl ring followed by abnormal Claisen rearrangement reaction (32%) in N,N-dimethylaniline (DMA), and Claisen-Schmidt condensation (72%) in acidic condition completed this synthesis (3 steps, overall 20%). Although their synthesis was breakthrough of current low yield producing multi-step synthesis, still the yield of the crucial step is bottleneck.

Related semi-synthesis through this abnormal Claisen rearrangement reaction was reported by Cheon's research team (Scheme 2). They converted licochalcone A (5) to licochalcone E (4) with a good yield (77% by thermal reaction). But this method has also limitation (valuable licochalcone A itself was used as a starting material).

Another important synthesis was done by Na's group

![Scheme 1](image1)

![Scheme 2](image2)
[3,3]-Sigmatropic rearrangement reaction in N,N-dimethylaniline with excessive butyric anhydride at 220-240 °C for 3 h produced the allyl group migrated products 7 and 8 in 38% and 18% yield, respectively. These were converted to licochalcone E & F by series of reactions. The chemical yield of this rearrangement step was so low that definitely it needs to be much improved. Similar procedure, but [3,3]-sigmatropic rearrangement was carried out at the final stage was also reported. The yield, however, was very low (their best yield was 21%). Recently, our research interest is focused how to supply of these important retrochalcones (especially licochalcone A & E) for in vitro and in vivo studies in small laboratory animals and human cancer cell lines. As part of the efforts to improve the current synthesis of these important natural products, we had focused the existing water-accelerated organic reactions because water is known to enhance the reaction rates as well as to affect the selectivity of various organic reactions. Organic co-solvent system has been used not only to increase the solubility of organic reactions in water but also to speed-up certain kinds of reactions; Diels-Alder, 1,3-dipolar cycloadditions, cycloadditions of azodicarboxylates, [3,3]-sigmatropic rearrangement, Passerni and Ugi reactions, nucleophilic substitution reactions, water-Sonogashira reactions, aqueous Suzuki-Miyaura reactions.

We recently developed EtOH/water co-solvent system to speed-up the [3,3]-sigmatropic rearrangement reaction using either microwave or sealed tube for the synthesis of licochalcone A (5). As the current low isolation yield, in vivo studies of licochalcone E (4) have been severely limited. Therefore, significant growing need was generated for developing effective synthetic methods in preparing this important natural product. We thought that we can convert chalcone compound (10) to licochalcone E through [3,3]-sigmatropic rearrangement using EtOH/water co-solvent system. Compound (10) can be prepared from Claisen-Schmidt condensation of THP-protected ketone (11) with aldehyde (6) (Scheme 4).

From readily available 4-hydroxy-2-methoxybenzaldehyde (1), the key intermediate (10) was prepared by 3 steps (Scheme 5). Allylation (93%) at 4-position with (E)-2-methyl-2-butenyl bromide (12) followed by Claisen-Schmidt condensation (71%) with compound (11) produced THP-protected chalcone aryl ether (13). Deprotection of THP group under mild acidic condition produced the chalcone aryl ether (10) in 83% yield.

Then, conversion of 10 to licochalcone E (4) was intensively studied (Scheme 6, Table 1). The [3,3]-sigmatropic rearrangement reaction was carried out in the stainless steel bomb reactor with EtOH/water co-solvent system. At 130 °C, the reaction proceeded with moderate yield for 24 h (67%; entry 1) to give licochalcone E, but decomposition of the product was observed in the longer reaction time (entries 2-3). The reaction did not proceed at all at 150 °C for 12 h (entry 4), but gave the best [3,3]-sigmatropic rearrangement yield at 150 °C for 24 h (84%; entry 5). The loss of allyl group was observed at 180 °C due to harsher reaction condition (entry 6). Loss of similar prenyl group of aryl prenyl ether in the [3,3]-sigmatropic rearrangement reaction was reported and this is one of the well known phenomena. However, Our water-accelerated [3,3]-sigmatropic rearrangement conditions using EtOH/water co-solvent system

![Scheme 3](image1.png)

Reagents and conditions; i) n-butyric anhydride, N,N-dimethylaniline, 220-240 °C, 3 h.

![Scheme 4](image2.png)

Retrosynthetic analysis of licochalcone E.

![Scheme 5](image3.png)

Reagents and conditions; i) 12 (1.5 equiv.), K2CO3 (2.0 equiv.), acetone, reflux, 3 h, ii) 11 (1.2 equiv.), KOH (3.0 equiv.), MeOH, rt, 12 h, iii) EtOH, 1N HCl, 40 °C, 1 h.
All chemicals were purchased from Sigma-Aldrich Chemicals and were used without further purification unless noted otherwise. NMR spectra were recorded at Varian Mercury-300 MHz FT-NMR and 75 MHz for 1H. CDCl3 was used as a solvent and an internal standard. Thin-layer chromatography (TLC) was performed on DC-Plastikfolien 60, F254 (Merck, layer thickness 0.2 mm) plastic-backed silica gel plates and visualized by UV light (254 nm) or staining with p-anisaldehyde.

**Experimental Section**

(E)-3-[4-Hydroxy-2-methoxy-5-(3-methylbut-2-enyloxy)phenyl]-1-(4-hydroxyphenyl) prop-2-en-1-one, Licochalcone E (4); General Procedure of water-accelerated [3,3]-sigmatropic rearrangement of aryl allyl ether. (E)-3-[2-Methoxy-4-(2-methylbut-2-enyloxy)phenyl]-1-(4-tetrahydropryranyl)prop-2-en-1-one, (10) (19 mg, 0.056 mmol) was dissolved in EtOH/water (4/1, v/v) (3 mL) and placed in a stainless steel bomb reactor. The bomb was tightly closed and put into inside of the electric-furnace operated at 150 °C for 24 h. After cooling down to rt, the bomb reactor was opened and the whole reaction mixture was transferred to 100 mL one neck round bottom flask and the solvent was evaporated in vacuo. Ethyl acetate (50 mL) was added and the organic phase was washed with distilled water (20 mL) and brine (10 mL). The organic phase was dried over anhydrous MgSO4 and filtered. The solvent was evaporated in vacuo. The residue was purified by silica gel flash column chromatography (EtOAc-Hexane = 1:10) to give an amorphous orange solid; yield: 16 mg (84%). The spectral data of this compound was nicely matched to the literature value.4,10,11,14,15 Rf = 0.41 (EtOAc-Hexane = 1:5). 1H NMR (300 MHz, acetone-d6) δ 8.00 (d, J = 15.9 Hz, 1H, H-β), 7.97 (d, J = 8.7 Hz, 2H), 7.64 (d, J = 15.6 Hz, 1H, H-α), 7.51 (s, 1H), 6.94 (d, J = 8.1 Hz, 2H), 6.60 (s, 1H), 4.89 (d, J = 6 Hz, 1H), 3.88 (s, 3H), 3.81 (m, 1H), 1.68 (s, 3H), 1.36 (d, J = 6.9 Hz, 3H); 13C NMR (75 MHz, acetone-d6) δ 187.6 (C=O), 161.5 (C1′), 155.1 (C2′), 158.5 (C3′), 149.1 (C7′), 139.1 (C9′), 130.8 (C8′), 128.6 (C′), 128.6 (C9), 124.2 (C1), 118.8 (C3′), 115.8 (C5′), 115.3 (C7′), 109.4 (C3′), 99.0 (C3), 55.4 (OMe), 38.1 (C1′), 21.7 (C′), 19.0 (C′).

Table 1. [3,3]-Sigmatropic rearrangement reaction of 10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Entry</th>
<th>Temp (°C)</th>
<th>Time (h)</th>
<th>Ratio (4/14)</th>
<th>Yield (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1a</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>100/0</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2a</td>
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<td>50</td>
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<td>32</td>
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<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4a</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>100/0</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5a</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>100/0</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6a</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>50/50</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a Reactions are carried out in the stainless steel bomb reactor. Electric furnace was used as a heating device. bSilica gel column purified yield.

separatory funnel. Ethyl acetate (50 mL) was added and washed with distilled water (20 mL) and brine (10 mL). The organic phase was separated, dried over anhydrous MgSO₄ and filtered. The solvent was evaporated again and the residue was purified by silica gel flash column chromatography (EtOAc-Hexane = 1:5) to give the titled compound as an oil; yield: 154 mg (83%). Rf = 0.27 (EtOAc-Hexane = 1:1). 1H NMR (300 MHz, CDCl₃) δ 8.04 (d, J = 15.6 Hz, 1H, H-β), 7.95 (d, J = 8.7 Hz, 2H), 7.54 (d, J = 15.6 Hz, 1H, H-α), 7.51 (d, J = 8.7 Hz, 1H), 6.93 (d, J = 8.7 Hz, 2H), 6.52 (m, 2H), 4.41 (s, 3H), 3.85 (s, 3H), 1.81 (s, 1H), 1.74 (s, 2H), 1.68 (q, J = 6.6 Hz, 2H), 1.25 (s, 3H); 13C NMR (75 MHz, CDCl₃) δ 190.5, 162.6, 160.8, 160.5, 140.6, 131.8, 131.3, 131.2, 124.8, 120.2, 117.3, 115.8, 106.5, 99.4, 74.6, 55.8, 30.1, 14.1, 13.8.

Acknowledgments. This research was financially supported by the Ministry of Knowledge Economy through the Center for Efficacy Assessment and Development of Functional Foods and Drugs at Hallym University (B0008864), and by Priority Research Centers Program through the National Foods and Drugs at Hallym University (B0008864), Center for Efficacy Assessment and Development of Functional Foods and Drugs at Hallym University (B0008864), and by Priority Research Centers Program through the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF) funded by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (2010-0029642).

References and Notes

13. See reference 11 and references there in.
26. The deprenylation product was inescapable at the high temperature; see Coombers, C. L.; Moody, C. J. J. Org. Chem. 2008, 73, 6758.