In-Ear EEG From Viscoelastic Generic Earpieces: Robust and Unobtrusive 24/7 Monitoring

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***Abstract*— We introduce a novel in-ear sensor which satisfies key design requirements for wearable electroencephalography (EEG)—it is discreet, unobtrusive, and capable of capturing high-quality brain activity from the ear canal. Unlike our initial designs, which utilize custom earpieces and require a costly and time-consuming manufacturing process, we here introduce the generic earpieces to make ear-EEG suitable for immediate and widespread use. Our approach represents a departure from silicone earmoulds to provide a sensor based on a viscoelastic substrate and conductive cloth electrodes, both of which are shown to possess a number of desirable mechanical and electrical properties. Owing to its viscoelastic nature, such an earpiece exhibits good conformance to the shape of the ear canal, thus providing stable electrode–skin interface, while cloth electrodes require only saline solution to establish low impedance contact. The analysis highlights the distinguishing advantages compared with the current state-of-the-art in ear-EEG. We demonstrate that such a device can be readily used for the measurement of various EEG responses.**

***Index Terms*— Electroencephalography, wearable sensors, biomedical engineering, materials.**

I. INTRODUCTION

WEARABLE health is envisaged to become a transformative force in global healthcare, which promises affordable, accessible and personalised diagnosis and treatment [1]. For this to become a reality, key advancements at the level of sensor technology are a pre-requisite. An ideal wearable sensor must be cheap, robust, unobtrusive, user-friendly and discreet for people to accept and wear it continuously. Inroads have been made in this direction by making the sensors either not visible or part of the accepted apparel and accessories. While it is relatively well-understood how to incorporate the various body-sensors into e.g. the clothing and watches, the requirement for discreet and unobtrusive sensing has proven to be particularly challenging in the area of electroencephalography (EEG) monitoring, where virtually all the devices are placed along the scalp. This is not only obtrusive, but also makes the recording process cumbersome and stigmatising.

EEG refers to the process of recording brain electrical activity. It is widely used in the fields of neuroscience, e.g. for monitoring brain activity during episodes of breathing cessation in patients suffering from sleep apnoea, and brain-computer interface (BCI), where brain waves are used to control, among other things, a cursor on the screen. Modern, state of the art sensors and systems are still very bulky, which is acceptable for inpatients, but prohibitive for outpatient ambulatory monitoring. Systems do exist (Emotiv, Mindo, etc.), which partially address the issues of portability and visual appeal, however, their indiscreet placement on the scalp prevents wide acceptance. To this end, we have recently introduced a novel EEG recording concept termed ear-EEG, which allows for electroencephalography signals to be acquired from inside the ear canal, thus paving the way towards non-stigmatising brain activity monitors [2].

The initial concept and prototypes were based on the personalised earpieces [3] widely used in the hearing aids industry. Their manufacturing process comprises a laborious and costly procedure of obtaining wax impressions of the subject's outer ear and ear canal, 3D scanning of the impressions, creating models and finally manufacturing earpieces with high resolution 3D printers. Although this yields tight-fitting earpieces – critical for good quality signals – it was found that this approach is not suitable for wide adoption due to cost, occasional difficulties of fitting, and the requirement for gelled electrodes to enable a low-impedance electrode-skin contact.

To address the issues of cost and ease-of-use, we have recently introduced generic earpieces made of silicone, with conductive silicone electrodes, which fit most adult ears and can be used off-the-shelf. We also reported on the ability of such electrodes to provide good quality signals in a standard EEG paradigm of acoustic steady state response (ASSR) [4]. These silicone earpieces were able to record the ASSR even in the challenging scenario when all the electrodes – sensing, reference and ground – were placed on a single earpiece inside the ear canal. Although a significant improvement over the initial, custom-made, rigid prototype, the silicone earpieces still inherit some of the drawbacks of hard-shell earpieces: they require conductive gel for good electrode-skin contact and their non-guaranteed conformance to the shape of the ear canal leads to motion artefacts. Moreover, the conductive silicone electrodes exhibited signs of degradation over a period

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Manuscript received July 9, 2015; revised August 19, 2015; accepted August 19, 2015. Date of publication August 21, 2015; date of current version December 10, 2015. The associate editor coordinating the review of this paper and approving it for publication was Prof. Octavian Postolache.

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Digital Object Identifier 10.1109/JSEN.2015.2471183

of several months which manifested itself in a significantly increased impedance of the electrodes.

In addition to our work, in the area of ultra-wearable EEG monitoring with generic earpieces, Lee *et al.* [5] recently reported in-ear headphones, in which buds were made conductive by loading silicone substrate with carbon nanotubes. The EEG was acquired by measuring the potential difference between the two ears. The overall results were promising, but there are also several drawbacks to this approach. First, the potential difference is measured between two ears, thus requiring cumbersome cabling from both ears to the acquisition unit. Second, such a setup limits spatial resolution necessary to attribute measured activity to a particular brain hemisphere, i.e. is only feasible for measuring lateralised phenomenas. Third, silicone buds provide suboptimal conformance to the shape of the ear canal, thus restricting the insertion depth and firmness of fit, leading to increased susceptibility to motion artefacts. Fourth, based on our experiments, the signal measured between two ears frequently contains strong cardiac component (ECG) [6], thus restricting the ability of such setup to acquire low frequency EEG. Finally, all of the earpieces described so far are too rigid to be used in young children, particularly newborns, because inserting the devices can damage the not yet fully formed bone around the ear canal.

To resolve these issues, we here introduce a novel earpiece which is comfortable to wear over extended periods of time and provides good quality EEG signals, even in subjects whose ear canals exhibit strong pulsation artefacts – critical cases, where the EEG recorded with custom-made plastic and previous generation silicone earpieces is compromised.

II. EARPIECE SENSOR

The two key components comprising the new device are a memory foam substrate and conductive cloth electrodes. The viscoelasticity of the substrate is a critical characteristic which ensures that the earpiece can be effortlessly and safely placed in the ear canal. Following insertion, the device expands and redistributes pressure evenly along the entirety of its contact surface, thus providing a stable interface with the skin, robust to mechanical disturbances. The viscoelasticity of the substrate also ensures that energy from abrupt motion (e.g. pulsation) is absorbed, thus minimally disturbing the electrode-skin contact. This approach is an alternative solution to the motion-induced artefacts in ear-EEG compared to that we introduced in [7]. Cloth electrodes are extremely flexible, conductive, soft, comfortable to wear and conform to changes in the substrate's shape when the earpiece is compressed prior to insertion. Only a small amount of saline solution is required to provide good electrical contact between the cloth and the skin.

A. Construction

All of the previous materials used for in-ear EEG sensors (silicone and plastic) have proven to be too stiff and rigid. They provide unevenly distributed pressure along the outer surface of the device, when put inside the ear canal, providing loose and intermittent electrode-skin contact, susceptible to motion artefacts. To alleviate this problem, the earpiece material must be soft, easy to fit, robust and suitable to self-administer. Such a material is already widely available, e.g. in sound-blocking earplugs, and is currently gaining popularity with in-ear headphones in the form of comfortable, sound-isolating buds. Such materials are widely referred to as memory foams.

Memory foam is viscoelastic, characterised by a time-dependent nature in the stress-strain relationship. It is capable of undergoing significant relaxation under constant strain, akin to viscous materials that flow when strained. On the other hand, it does not permanently deform when squeezed, stretched or twisted (in the limited range of strains) and given enough time it returns to its original shape – characteristic of the elastic (rubbery) response.

Not all polymers are viscoelastic to any significant practical extent, but viscoelasticity can be engineered into a material by adjusting its chemistry and microstructure.[1] [8]. For example polyurethane can be mixed with additional chemicals, controlling its density and viscosity, and subsequently foamed to produce memory foam widely used in mattresses and pillows, well known for their pressure-relieving properties [9].

It is self-evident that memory foam has many of the key characteristics required for a substrate of the in-ear EEG sensor. It can undergo significant compression without losing the original shape – required for comfortable and easy insertion. The pressure on the outside surface of the proposed foam earplug is uniformly redistributed, thus creating excellent contact with the skin at any point on the earpiece providing robust electrode-skin interface and comfort during long term wearing. Foam can be engineered to exhibit various degrees of firmness and the material is cheap and can be moulded into many different shapes if needed.

To accommodate the high levels of compression that foam earplugs undergo prior to insertion, the electrodes must be made out of similarly flexible but sturdy material. We have tested a number of different options, namely: polyurethane-based silver-loaded flexible adhesive, conductive copper paint, silver-loaded silicone rubber and stretchable conductive fabric. We have established that the adhesive and the paint do not possess the required sturdiness when dry, and crack even under minor compression levels of the underlying substrate. Silicone rubber was found to be extremely hard to attach to the substrate as well as to the wires, it also exhibited high impedance after several straining cycles. Stretchable fabric performed best, it easily accommodated all of the required deformations, provided low impedance even after several months of use, and was straightforward to attach to the substrate and wires.

The chosen conductive cloth is made out of silver-coated nylon interwoven with elastic fibres. It can stretch in both directions and has very low impedance of only 0.5 Ohm/sq. To create the electrodes, strips of fabric 4 mm wide and 1 cm long were cut, into which stainless steel thread was sewn, thus allowing standard wires to be soldered directly to the

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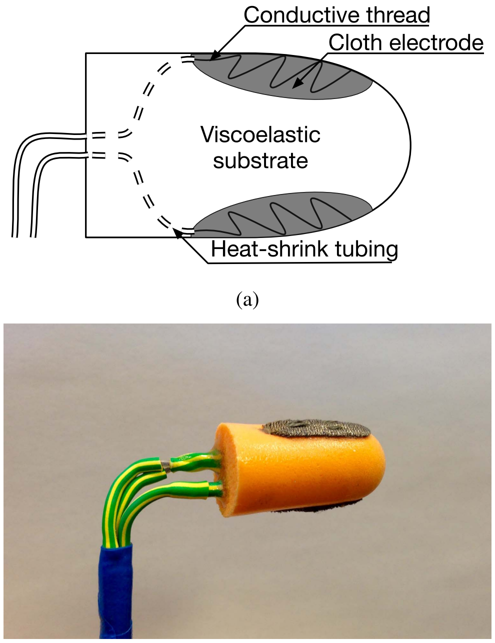
[1] Transparent polymer films in the car windshields are used in the viscoelastic regime, giving them significant energy dissipation capabilities during impact.



(a)

(b)

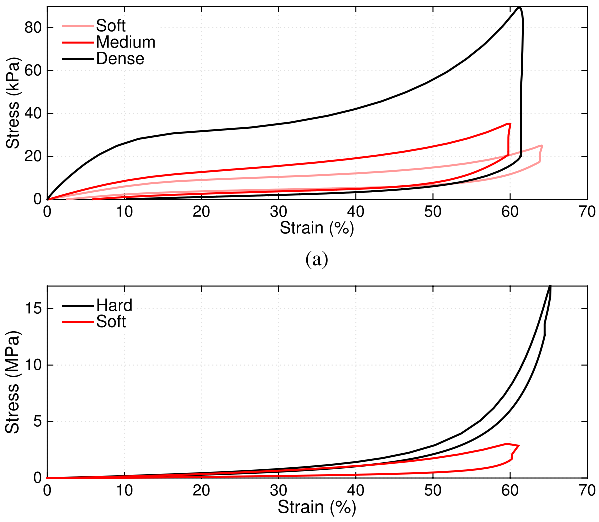
Fig. 1. Proposed in-ear EEG sensor on a viscoelastic substrate. (a) Earpiece construction diagram. (b) Photo of the earpiece.

thread. Since the thread is made out of stainless steel and the cloth is silver-plated the whole electrode is resistant to corrosion. The fabric strips were then placed on two sides of the memory foam earplug opposite one another and were attached to the substrate using flexible adhesive. Stainless steel thread attached to the electrode was insulated with heat shrink tubing and passed through the bulk of the earplug exiting through the flat face of the earpiece. This arrangement created an in-ear EEG sensor with two electrodes diametrically opposed to each other as shown in Fig. 1.

B. Mechanical Characteristics

To evaluate the mechanical performance of the proposed earpiece and establish the key difference in its behaviour against the earlier prototypes, we have subjected the substrate to a strain test to produce stress-strain curves for a number of different variants of memory foam and silicone. A total of three foam samples and two samples of silicone material with different degrees of density were selected at random. Prior to the evaluation, earpieces were cut to approximately 16mm tall cylinders with the opposing faces as flat as possible. The measurements we performed on a dynamic mechanical analyser where the cylinders were subjected to compressive strain. The first testing phase comprised rapid compression which squeezed the earpieces by 10mm in 2.4s. Then the strain was held constant for 1min and finally slowly released at 2mm/min rate. Corresponding stress-strain curves for different materials are shown on Fig. 2.

The plots in Fig. 2 reveal a significant relaxation exhibited by each of the viscoelastic earpieces following rapid compression – a key desired aspect for long-term wearability. This characteristic is critically important for both the comfort of the user as well as the contact quality between the electrode and skin. Additionally, all of the foam earpieces are significantly softer than their silicone counterparts for a given compression rate, e.g. they exhibit mere 5kPa outward pressure at 40% compression compared to 300kPa of silicone. To achieve secure placement within the ear no significant outward pressure is needed, this is achieved through excellent conformance of the viscoelastic material to the shape of the canal.



(a)

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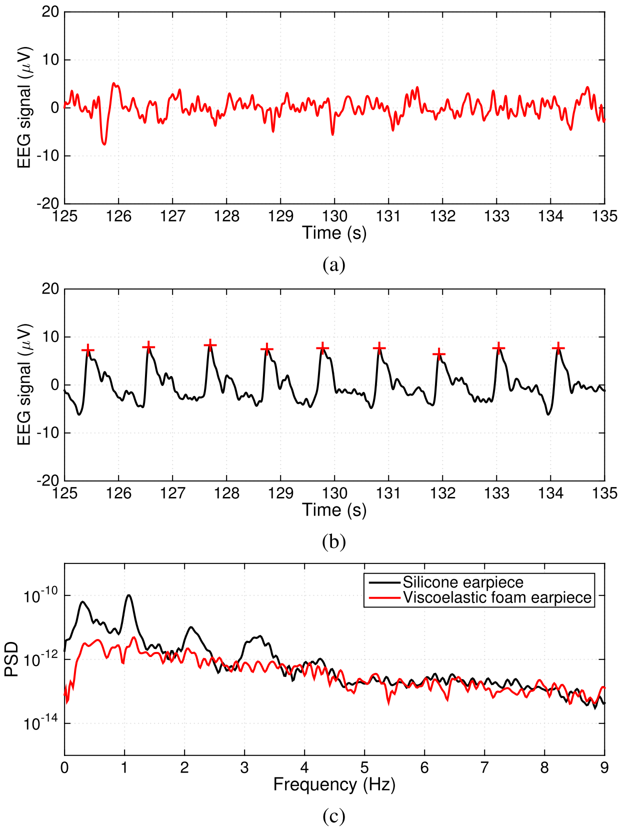
Fig. 2. Stress-strain responses of various earpiece materials. (a) Stress-strain response of viscoelastic foam substrates. (b) Stress-strain response of silicone substrates.

In general, there are two broad types of electrodes: nonpolarisable and polarisable [10]. The best known practical example which closely resembles the characteristics of the former type is the silver/silver chloride electrode. It has a thin layer of a slightly-soluble ionic compound which is usually brought in contact with an electrolyte containing anions of chloride, such that there is almost no overpotentials and the current passes freely across the electrode-electrolyte interface. The latter type – polarisable electrodes – are frequently made with noble metals and no charge crosses the electrode-electrolyte barrier, hence they are also known as capacitive electrodes.

Nonpolarisable electrodes are relatively robust to mechanical motion artefacts, particularly in the events when the electrode-skin distance changes without breaking the contact with electrolyte [11]. On the other hand, the capacitive electrodes, such as the conductive cloth in the proposed sensor, are very sensitive to such movements which change distance between the ‘capacitor plates’, creating electrical noise in the signals acquired. As mentioned earlier, viscoelastic materials possess good energy absorption capabilities, which allows our earpiece to mitigate the effects of motion artefacts, particularly those induced by pulsatile movements of the ear canal wall.

To verify this property we have tested the viscoelastic earpieces in people whose ear canals exhibited strong pulsation, against our earlier designs – the rigid plastic and silicone earpieces. One representative case is shown on Fig. 3,



(a)

(b)

(c)

Fig. 3. Comparison of signal quality between viscoelastic foam earpieces and silicone earpieces. (a) In-ear EEG segment from memory foam earpiece. (b) In-ear EEG segment from silicone earpiece. (c) PSD of the EEG signals from silicone and memory foam earpieces.

which compares the EEG signals obtained from the same person, from the same ear canal, when using the silicone-based earpiece and the viscoelastic foam-based one. Observe that the EEG from the proposed sensor does not have any pulsation artefacts, while that from the silicone-based one is badly affected. Spectral analysis of these signals reveals that the silicone earpiece is not suitable for recording low frequency brain waves (<5Hz) due to significant corruption of those frequencies from artefacts induced by pulsation, as indicated by '+' in Fig. 3(b).

C. Electrical Characteristics

The two key aspects of the electrical characteristic of the proposed sensor are: (i) the low impedance is achievable with small amounts of standard non-abrasive electrolyte and normal cleaning of the ear canal and (ii) the stability of such contact over time. Both of the requirements can be satisfied with the appropriate choice of electrodes – conductive cloth has all the mechanical characteristics to be used in conjunction with viscoelastic foam substrates and it also performs well in the context of EEG acquisition [12].

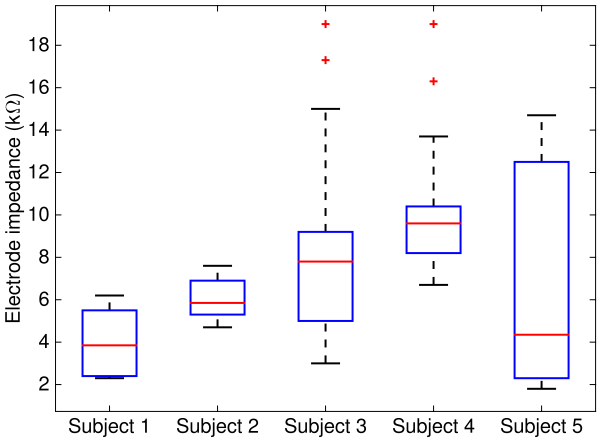


Fig. 4. Box plot of electrode impedances illustrating median, quartiles and outliers for electrode impedances in 5 subjects over 8 hours.

We have verified that the required low impedance electrode-skin contact can be achieved without abrasion or other means uncomfortable to the user. Long term stability of such contact has been investigated through the following experiment: 5 healthy male volunteers aged between 28 and 35 were asked to wear the earpiece for a period of 8 hours and to record electrode impedances at 30 minute intervals using AVATAR – a portable biosignal acquisition unit by Electrical Geodesics. The experiment was carried out in Jul-15 in London and subjects' activities throughout the day were not restricted, in order to test the operation of the device in normal, real-life conditions. The impedance of each in-ear electrode was measured with respect to a gelled ground electrode placed on the earlobe. The outcome of the experiments is demonstrated in Fig. 4, which shows that the median impedance of the in-ear electrodes remains below 10kΩ over the full duration of the experiment with maximum value for one subject at 19kΩ, which occurred after eating. Nevertheless, it was still possible to obtain clear alpha and ASSR responses even with electrode impedances of 40kΩ. We have observed that jaw movements (e.g. while eating) can increase the impedance of the electrode-skin contact by dislodging the earpiece, but a lower impedance can be restored by simply pushing it back into its original position in the ear. None of the volunteers reported any physical pain or particular discomfort while wearing the earpiece throughout the day. The main concern reported was a difficulty in hearing and comprehending other people with one of the ears being occluded. In future studies we plan to modify these earpieces to include an air vent if they are to be worn for extended periods of time during the day; on the other hand the prototypes to be utilised in sleep-monitoring experiments will retain their sound-blocking capabilities.

III. EEG ACQUISITION

After the mechanical and electrical characteristics of the proposed sensor have been tested and verified, we next considered its use in the context of EEG acquisition. In our previous work, we demonstrated the feasibility of recording EEG from within the ear canal using personalised earpieces [2], [13]. Here, we validate the generic earpieces in a similar fashion via well-established auditory and visual evoked responses: the auditory steady-state response (ASSR) and the steady-state visually evoked potential (SSVEP), additionally we also present transient evoked potentials. Although the prototypes used for the experiments were occluding the ear canal, they can be readily modified to incorporate an air vent, which will not affect the mechanical properties of the viscoelastic foam.

The ASSR [14] is one of the primary EEG responses used to assess hearing threshold level [15]. When presented with either a broadband or a narrow-band auditory signal which is amplitude-modulated, typically with frequencies in the range 40-80Hz, the cochlear performs a frequency specific encoding of the amplitude of the sound signal, whereby the amplitude variations are transformed into a neural response at the modulation frequency. The response is typically most pronounced in the temporal lobe of the brain, which is located in close proximity of the ear canal, thus making the ASSR appropriate for testing the in-ear approach.

The SSVEP originates in the visual cortex [16], [17] in response to visual stimuli, typically a light source flashing at a fixed rate within the range 1Hz to 100Hz [17]. The neural response from the primary visual cortex contains frequency components at the light modulation frequency and harmonics of it. This paradigm is widely used in e.g. brain computer interface due to its excellent signal-to-noise ratio. We also examined the transient response to a visual stimulus – the visual evoked potential (VEP) – by time-averaging epochs following stimulus presentation. Over the past half century transient evoked potentials have been used to study a wide variety of physiological aspects of brain function such as attention [18], and are frequently used in BCI applications [19].

A. Experimental Setup

In all experiments, EEG was simultaneously obtained from both the proposed in-ear generic earpiece as well as standard on-scalp electrodes. The g.USBamp, a high quality 24-bit biosignal amplifier from g.tec, was used to perform all data acquisition; the unit facilitates simultaneous acquisition from independent recording setups, through its recording configurations with different ground and reference electrode placements, which do not employ driven right leg for interference cancellation and thus enable a rigorous comparison between in-ear and on-scalp recordings. On-scalp EEG was obtained from electrode positions based on the international 10-20 system: the left mastoid (A1), the left-central (C3) and the central regions (Cz). All scalp electrodes were referenced to the right earlobe and the ground electrode was placed on the forehead. In-ear EEG was obtained from the left ear from two electrodes placed at diametrically opposed locations along the ear canal wall (see Fig. 1(b)), referenced to a gold cup electrode placed behind the left helix, with the ground gold cup electrode placed on the left earlobe. This electrode setup was somewhat different to the one we proposed in earlier work [4] where both ground and reference electrodes were also placed on the earpiece. The data was acquired with a sampling rate of 1.2kS/s. All the presented results were obtained from a healthy male subject[2] aged 32.

The ASSR experiment was performed using over-the-ear headphones presenting an auditory stimulus comprising a 1kHz sinusoid, amplitude-modulated with a 40Hz sinusoidal signal. The audio was generated in MATLAB and was presented at a sufficiently loud volume to accommodate the lack of acoustic vents in the earpieces.

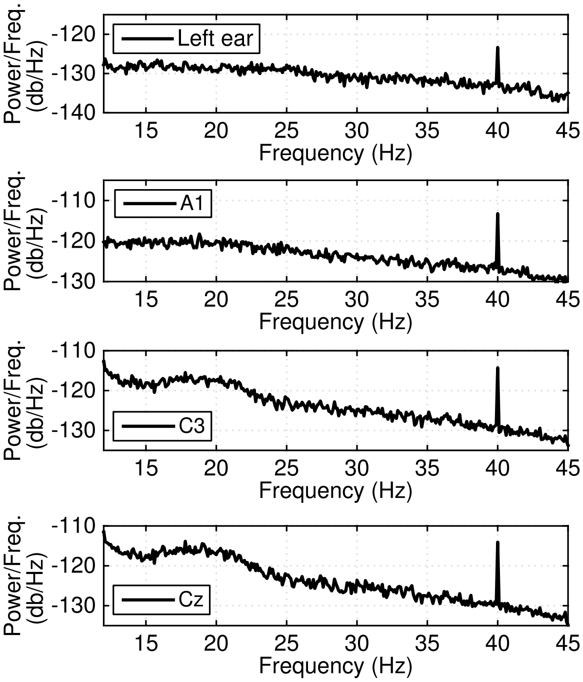


Fig. 5. PSD analysis of ASSR response from an ear-electrode and mastoid (A1) and central regions (C3,Cz) scalp-electrodes, for a stimulus: 40Hz amplitude-modulated auditory tone. Observe the responses from all electrode sites at 40Hz.

The VEP and SSVEP experiments were performed with a red LED of 13 000mcd brightness. For the VEP experiments the LED was switched fully ON for 200ms followed by a fully OFF state for 1800ms while for SSVEP the LED's light intensity was varied sinusoidally from fully OFF to fully ON regimes at a rate of 15Hz using pulse width modulation (PWM). An Arduino Uno board generated the PWM waveform with the aid of built-in counters, and the whole setup was placed inside an opaque black box with only the frontal region of the LED exposed, providing a viewing angle of 18°. The subject was seated approximately 70cm away from the stimulus which was positioned at head height. In all of the experiments, the subject was instructed to observe the stimulus while avoiding any head movements or eye activity. The duration of the experiments was 250s.

B. Experimental Results

Fig. 5 shows the power spectral density (PSD) estimates for the ear and scalp recordings for the ASSR experiment. Prior to PSD analysis, the data was bandpass filtered using a 4th order Butterworth filter with cutoff frequencies at 1 and 45Hz. The PSD analysis was performed using Welch's averaged periodogram method, the window length was 10s and the degree of overlap was 50%. A clear peak at the 40Hz modulation frequency is visible from all electrode locations. We defined the signal-to-noise ratio (SNR) of the ASSR as the height of the response peak above the background EEG [13]. As shown previously using the personalised earpieces [2], [13],

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[2] We have also conducted all of the experiments discussed on 4 other volunteers with similar outcomes, but these results are part of a separate study and are not reported here.

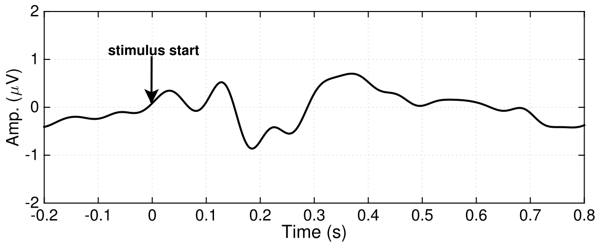

Fig. 6. VEP response to visual stimulus obtained with the proposed generic earpiece.

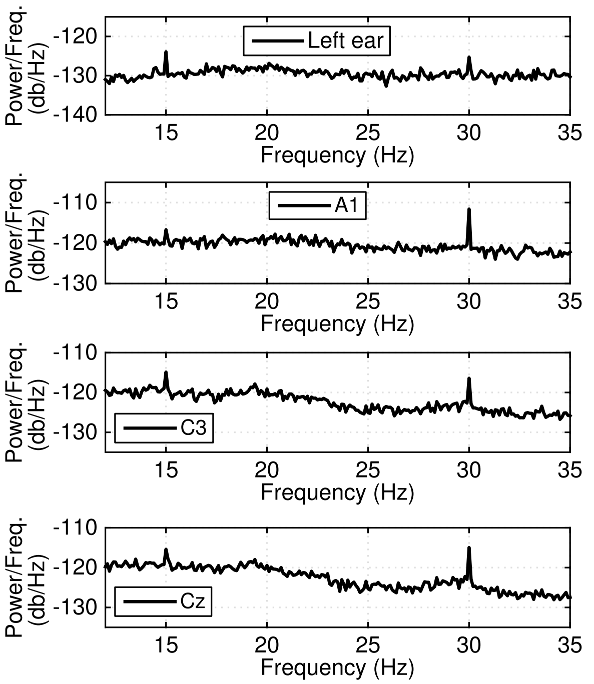

Fig. 7. PSD analysis of SSVEP response from an ear-electrode and mastoid (A1) and central regions (C3,Cz) scalp-electrodes, for a stimulus: LED flashing at 15Hz. Observe the responses from all electrode sites at 15Hz and at the first harmonic – 30Hz.

the results indicate that the SNR in ASSR obtained from the in-ear approach is on a par with that obtained from the on-scalp electrodes placed at the mastoid and temporal regions – at approximately 10dB.

The result of the VEP experiment is demonstrated on Fig. 6. The raw signal was first bandpass filtered using a 4th order Butterworth filter with cutoff frequencies at 1 and 13Hz. Subsequently, the dataset was split into 110 two-second epochs, for which the start and stop times were determined by the stimulus waveform. The samples where then averaged across all of epochs to produce the VEP signal. A clear negative deflection is evident, approximately 180ms after the onset of the stimulus. This matches the VEP results in [20] which reported a waveform of negative deflection and similar shape using electrodes positioned over the temporal region.

Fig. 7 shows the PSD estimates for the ear- and scalp-recordings for the SSVEP experiment. Prior to PSD analysis, the data was bandpass filtered using a 4th order Butterworth filter with cutoff frequencies at 5 and 45Hz. The PSD analysis was performed using the same setup as for the ASSR experiment. Clear peaks at the stimulus frequency – 15Hz, and at the first harmonic – 30Hz, are visible from all electrode locations. Given the distribution of the response across multiple harmonics, it was not straightforward to assess the SSVEP SNR. However the response obtained using the in-ear electrode is clearly weaker compared with those obtained from the central regions. This is as expected given the distance of the ear canal from the response source – occipital region.

IV. CONCLUSION

A novel in-ear sensor has been developed for high-quality long-term EEG monitoring. It has been constructed with two key components – a viscoelastic substrate and conductive cloth electrodes. Both of these posses a number of desirable properties critical for unobtrusive and discreet in-ear sensing.

The substrate comprises a medium-density memory foam which enables the earpiece to conform to most ear canal shapes and to redistribute outward pressure along the entirety of its surface post insertion. These qualities lead to increased comfort for the wearer, provide secure placement of the device inside the ear canal with minimal pressure to the canal walls, and thus allow the possibility to acquire ear-EEG in general population.

The electrodes within the proposed earpiece have been constructed from conductive fabric and can accommodate all of the required deformations of the underlying viscoelastic substrate without losing any of the desirable electrical properties. Such electrodes have been shown to require only saline solution to achieve low impedance electrode-skin contact which enables stable electrical recordings, even over prolonged periods of time.

We have shown that the proposed device is virtually immune to motion artefacts generated by the pulsatile ear canal wall movements, and that it allows for the acquisition of a wide frequency range of EEG, including the critical case of very low frequencies – crucial for monitoring brain activity during e.g. sleep. It has also been demonstrated that the proposed generic device can be readily used to acquire all of the standard EEG responses, such as steady-state and transient responses to visual and auditory stimuli, thus paving the way for truly wearable EEG acquisition.

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