Synthesis and characterization of nanosized ZrTiO₄ powders prepared by the sol-gel method

I. C. Cosentino¹, F. M. Vichi², E. N. S. Muccillo¹, R. Muccillo¹
¹CCTM - Instituto de Pesquisas Energéticas e Nucleares
Travessa R 400, Cidade Universitária, S. Paulo, SP 05508-900
²Laboratório de Química de Materiais e Energia
Depto. Química Fundamental - Instituto de Química da USP
Av. Prof. Lineu Prestes, 748, Cidade Universitária, S. Paulo, SP 05508-900

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Abstract: Ceramic ZrTiO₄ powders were prepared by a modified sol-gel method using zirconium oxychloride and titanium tetraisopropoxide. In situ high temperature X-ray diffraction results show that crystallization of the amorphous gel starts at 400 °C. Single-phase ZrTiO₄ nanoparticles were obtained after heat treatment at 450 °C for 1 h. An average particle size of 46 nm has been determined by nitrogen adsorption analysis. After pressing these sinteractive powders, pellets with controlled pore size distribution were obtained by sintering at temperatures as low as 400 °C. The analysis of pores by mercury porosimetry show an average porosity of 45 %. Pressing and sintering the nanosized powders prepared by that modified sol-gel technique produced pellets that are good candidates to be used in humidity sensing devices.

Introduction

Ceramic materials based on zirconium titanate (ZrTiO₄) are extensively used in humidity sensors [1-3], resonators for microwave telecommunications [4-6], catalysis [7-9], and optical devices [10]. Other materials, based on zirconium titanate, have found applications as high temperature pigments and ceramic composites [11]. Classical ZrTiO₄ synthesis involves a solid state reaction of a stoichiometric mixture of zirconium and titanium oxides at temperatures above 1400 °C [12]. More recently, the preparation of agglomerated 0.5-3.0 µm single phase ZrTiO₄ particles at 1300 °C from the precursor oxides was reported [13]. Solid state reactions involve grinding and thorough mixing of precursor powders followed by high temperature prolonged sintering; the results are usually low specific surface area powders. The sol-gel technology may overcome these problems because highly sinteractive (high specific surface area) powders may be prepared, requiring much lower sintering temperature [14]. A number of ZrO₂-TiO₂ binary oxides prepared by the sol-gel technique have been reported [15-18]. Fully crystalline and stoichiometric ZrTiO₄ have been obtained with a crystallization temperature of 400 °C by preparing TiO₂ and ZrO₂ gels and mixing them on a 1:1 ratio [15]. The low temperature synthesis of ZrTiO₄ from different precursors with a Zr:Ti concentration ratio of 1:1 has been reported [17], with ZrTiO₄ phase formation around 700 °C.

Taking advantage of the sol-gel method, the low temperature preparation of ZrTiO₄ ceramic nanoparticles was successfully achieved and is here described. The material was prepared by a modified sol-gel method, in which the titanium alcoxide is hydrolized in the presence of zirconium oxychloride, as opposed to hydrolising in pure acidic water. Our aim using this modified approach is to ensure the maximum contact between titanium and zirconium, thus leading to lower formation temperatures for ZrTiO₄. These materials are more homogeneous, crystallize at a lower temperature and are more sinteractive than the ones obtained by the conventional solid state synthesis.
Experimental

Ceramic powder preparation

The starting materials were a solution of zirconium oxychloride ZrOCl₂·8H₂O and titanium tetraisopropoxide Ti[OCH(CH₃)₂]₄ - Alfa Aesar. The zirconium oxychloride was prepared by dissolving, in hydrochloric acid, hydrous zirconium oxide ZrO₂·nH₂O (>99%) produced at IPEN-Brazil. For the preparation of the ceramic powders in the nominal composition ZrO₂:TiO₂, titanium tetraisopropoxide was slowly added to a zirconium oxychloride solution (pH ~0.5) under continuous stirring at room temperature. The suspension was stirred for approximately 7 days. The solution, milky with a white precipitate at the beginning, was translucent after long time stirring. The obtained sol was then dried at approximately 40 °C for another 7 days. A yellowish transparent glassy material was then obtained and ground to obtain the amorphous ZrTiO₄ ceramic powder.

Some specimens were also prepared by the polymeric precursor technique and by mixing the oxides. The specimens were sintered in air at different temperatures for obtaining specimens with different pore volume content [3].

Characterization

The stoichiometry of the powders was analyzed by X-ray fluorescence. Standard compositions of (ZrO₂)ₓ(TiO₂)₁₋ₓ (x=0, 0.25, 0.50, 0.75 and 1) were prepared for XRF measurements. The relative concentrations of Ti and Zr in the powders obtained by the sol-gel technique were determined as 50.1% and 49.9%, respectively.

Thermogravimetric analysis (Shimadzu model TGA-50) was carried out in the dried powder under synthetic air in the room temperature - 800 °C range, with a 20 °C min⁻¹ heating rate. Differential Scanning Calorimetry analysis (Shimadzu model DSC-50) was carried out in the 25-475 °C at the same rate. Simultaneous thermogravimetric and differential thermal analysis was also carried out under synthetic air from room temperature to 800 °C at 10 °C min⁻¹ heating rate using a Netzsch STA 409E equipment.

The specific surface area of the powders was evaluated by gas adsorption analysis by the BET method using a Micromeritics ASAP 2000 equipment.

Scanning electron microscopy experiments were carried out on powder suspensions in a LEO 440 SEM equipment for observing particle shape and to evaluate average particle size.

X-ray diffraction analysis was performed in all powders with CuKα radiation in the 20-80° 20 range in a Bruker-AXS D8 Advance X-ray diffractometer. High temperature in situ X-ray diffraction experiments were performed in the same diffractometer in a 0-0 configuration with an Anton Paar HTK-16 sample chamber and a Braun PSD detector.

Powder density was evaluated by mercury porosimetry with a Micromeritics Autopore III porosimeter. The pore size distribution and the apparent density of the pellets were evaluated in the 360 µm - 0.003 µm (30 Å) range using mercury pressure up to 414 MPa.

Results and Discussion

Powder analysis

Figure 1 shows the thermogravimetric analysis of the zirconia-titania powder prepared by the sol-gel technique.

A significant mass loss is measured from room temperature to approximately 600 °C due to the removal of water, organic substances, and chloride. The remaining material corresponds to 42.9% of the mass before heating. The mass loss occurs in at least three steps: 33.8% from RT to 384 °C, 20.1% in the 384-417 °C range, and 3.2% in the 417-600 °C range. The sharp feature of the mass loss in the second step might be associated to the exothermic crystallization process. Carefully controlled differential scanning calorimetry experiments, as
shown in the inset of Figure 2, did not allow for determining unambiguously the expected exothermic peak of the crystallization process.

High temperature in situ X-ray diffraction analysis (see below) helped to determine accurately the crystallization temperature. The temperatures 450 °C and also 600 °C were chosen as calcination temperatures for the powders prepared by the sol-gel technique.

Figure 2 shows X-ray diffraction patterns of the powders obtained by the sol-gel technique after calcination at 450 °C for 1 h (Figure 2a) and at 600 °C for 1 h (2b). For comparison purposes, the diffraction pattern of a powder obtained by the polymeric precursor technique and calcined at 730 °C for 1 h is also shown (Figure 2c). The diffraction patterns of Figures 2a and 2b show that the powders are crystallized in the ZrTiO₄ structure according to ICDD file #80-1783. Only the reflections due to the ZrTiO₄ phase are identified in powders obtained by the sol-gel technique and calcined at 450 and 600 °C. Similar results are obtained in powders prepared by the polymeric precursor technique. Moreover, the crystallization occurs at a temperature lower than that of the powders obtained by the polymeric precursor technique [3]. Most of the methods for obtaining ZrTiO₄ crystalline powders require temperatures close to 700 °C [19].

High temperature X-ray diffraction experiments were performed for crystallization studies. Figure 3 shows the dependence of the intensity of the (111) reflection (2θ = 30.498°, ICDD file # 80-1783) on the temperature upon heating the ZrTiO₄ amorphous ceramic powder from 27 °C to 800 °C. Data were collected at the following temperatures: 27, 100, 200, 250, 300, 350, 400 to 500 °C at 10 °C increment, and 550 to 800 °C at 50 °C increment. The heating rate for reaching each temperature was set at 4 °C s⁻¹. The inset shows the (111) reflection at all these temperatures. Figure 3 shows that crystallization starts at approximately 400 °C.
Fig. 2 X-ray diffraction patterns of the ZrTiO₄ powders obtained by the sol-gel technique and calcined at 450 (a) and 600 °C (b) for 1 h; for comparison purposes, the X-ray diffraction pattern of the powder obtained by the polymeric precursor technique and calcined at 730 °C for 1 h is also shown (c) [3]. Indexation according to ICDD file 80-1783.

Fig. 3 High temperature in situ X-ray diffraction data: intensity of the (111) reflection of ZrTiO₄ powders obtained by the sol-gel technique as a function of temperature in the 27-800 °C range.

Figures 4a and 4b show the results of the scanning electron microscopy experiments on powders calcined at 450 and 600 °C, respectively, for 1 h. Both powders consist of large agglomerates probably resulting from the high combustion heat produced during the thermal decomposition of the powders, these agglomerates are composed of clusters of submicron sized particles.

A detailed analysis of the powders was done to find the average equivalent diameter of the agglomerated particles. The BET method for the determination of the specific surface area by nitrogen gas adsorption analysis was applied. The results show that the specific surface area of ZrTiO₄ powder after calcination at 450 and 600 °C are 43 and 38 m² g⁻¹, respectively. Using the equation $D (\mu m) = \frac{6}{(\rho.S)}$, the equivalent spherical diameter of the particles $D$ was evaluated; $\rho$, determined by mercury porosimetry, and $S$ stand for the ZrTiO₄ density (g cm⁻³) and the specific surface area (m² g⁻¹), respectively.
Fig. 4 Scanning electron microscopy micrographs of the ZrTiO₄ powders obtained by the sol-gel technique: a) calcination temperature 450°C for 1h (7000X); b) 600°C for 1 h (7000X).

These results are shown in Table 1. Particles treated at 450 and 600 °C show no apparent modification in their average size. The specific surface area shows a slight decrease with consequent increase in the apparent density and in the average size of the particles probably due to particle sintering and pore elimination. Table 1 also shows values of the mean crystallite size L of these powders, determined using the Scherrer equation [20]. The mean crystallite sizes are of the same order of magnitude (approximately half) of the values of the average particle sizes determined by gas adsorption analysis. This means that the nanoparticles obtained by the modified sol-gel technique here described may be single crystalline, provided further cominution of the dried gel is done.

Table 1. Specific surface area S, apparent density ρ, average equivalent diameter D, and crystallite size L of the powders obtained by the sol-gel technique after calcination at 450 °C and 600 °C.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Temperature of calcination</th>
<th>S (m²/g)</th>
<th>ρ (g/cm³)</th>
<th>D (nm)</th>
<th>L (nm)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>450 °C</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>46.5</td>
<td>20.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>600 °C</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>49.5</td>
<td>21.5</td>
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</tbody>
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Analysis of the sintered pellets

The powders calcined at 600 °C were pressed and heat treated at 300 and 400 °C for 3 h. Figure 5 shows the X-ray diffraction patterns of these pellets. There is a partial decomposition of the ZrTiO₄ phase to monoclinic zirconia (Figs. 5a and b). As the temperature is lower than the calcination temperature, mechanical stresses during pressing could be the main reason for that decomposition. Similar results have been observed in nanosized tetragonal zirconia particles submitted to mechanical stress by grinding [21]. In the same figure, the X-ray diffraction patterns of ZrTiO₄ specimens obtained by solid state synthesis, Figure 5d and 5e, and by the polymeric precursor technique, Figure 5c, are also shown. The pellets prepared using powders obtained by the polymeric precursor technique and sintered at 1150 °C (Figure 5c) are ZrTiO₄ single phase. The pellet obtained by solid state synthesis and sintered at 950 °C have two phases: monoclinic zirconia and rutile TiO₂. The ZrTiO₄ phase is found only after sintering at 1050 °C and higher temperatures, becoming ZrTiO₄ single phase only after sintering at 1250 °C (Figure 5e), in agreement with reported results [22].
Fig. 5  X-ray diffraction patterns of pellets sintered at 300 (a) and 400 °C (b) for 1 h, prepared with powders obtained by a sol-gel technique. Also shown the X-ray diffraction patterns of pellets sintered at 1150 °C for 1 h from powders prepared by the polymeric precursor technique (c) and sintered at 950 °C (d) and 1250 °C (e) for 1 h from powders prepared by the solid state synthesis.

The application of the ZrTiO$_4$ sintered pellets we are looking for is as humidity sensing main component. Therefore, one of the main requirements is a large distribution of pores for accommodation of water species for changing the electrical resistivity. Figure 6 shows the results of the pore size distribution analysis of the pellets sintered at 300 and at 400 °C, prepared from powders obtained by the sol-gel technique. Pore distribution is about the same for both specimens, with approximately 45% pore volume and similar size distribution. Both specimens have also a large pore density in the region 50 - 300 Å. This is important for designing ceramic humidity sensors because the larger is the pore density in that range, the better is the linearity and the sensitivity of the sensor [23].

Conclusions

A successful preparation of clustered nanosized particles of ZrTiO$_4$ ceramic powders by a modified sol-gel technique allowed for sintering at relatively low temperatures porous
ceramic pellets. The crystallization temperature of the powders was accurately determined as 400 °C by \textit{in situ} high temperature X-ray diffraction. The average size values of the nanoparticles is approximately twice that of the crystallite size value. The sol-gel technique is an appropriate technique for preparing sinteractive ceramic nanoparticles

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\textbf{References}