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Densification behaviour and two stage master sintering curve in lithium sodium niobate ceramics

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Abstract

The Master Sintering Curve (MSC) has received much attention in recent years due to its ability to predict sintering behaviour of a given powder and green body process regardless of its thermal history. In this paper MSC, based on the combined stage sintering model is constructed for one of the most important lead-free piezoelectric *viz*. lithium sodium niobate, $Na_{1-x}Li_xNbO_3$ ($x=0.12$, LNN-12), ceramic using shrinkage data. The present study has been carried out to understand and control the densification behaviour during pressureless sintering. Two distinct stages of densification have been observed en route to the upper limit to sintering temperature. The activation energies of densification for the two temperature ranges *viz*. 800–1150 °C and 1150–1300°C were found to be 365 kJ/mol and 2530 kJ/mol, respectively, through the construction of MSC. The MSC should be useful in predicting the densification behaviour and the final density and for designing a reproducible fabrication schedule for the LNN-12 ceramics.

Keywords: A. Sintering; C. Diffusion; D. Niobates; Master sintering curve

1. Introduction

In recent years, demand for the new, lead-free piezoelectric materials for technological applications has increased because of environmental concerns. Among the many lead-free piezoelectric ceramic systems investigated, alkali niobate piezoelectric ceramics have been found to be attractive due to their excellent piezoelectric properties (*viz.* piezoelectric coefficient, $300 < d_{33} < 400$ pC/N; electromechanical coupling constant, $0.4 < k_p < 0.6$; mechanical quality factor, $200 < Q_m < 700$) and high Curie temperature ($T_c \sim 400$ °C). It has been reported that lithium sodium niobate, $Na_{1-x}Li_xNbO_3$, a promising system for high frequency applications, offers a relatively high electromechanical coupling, $k_p \sim 0.4$, and significant mechanical quality factor, $Q_m \sim 755$, at its morphotropic phase boundary (MPB) composition, $x=0.12$ ($Li_{0.12}Na_{0.88}$) NbO_3 (LNN-12) [1]. These property parameters are, however, found to be strongly dependent on the materials final density, synthesis technique followed, and sintering parameters [2,3]. The process parameters which influence sintering the most are: temperature, holding time, initial particle size, green density and bulk composition [4,5]. The parameters such as holding time (t) and temperature (T) of sintering are decided either through the preliminary exploratory runs or the ceramic phase diagram or both. Further, any changes to these parameters may cause undesired density, shape distortion, warping, development of cracks and microstructural damages in the final product. Therefore, there is a need to predict the sintering behaviour *ab initio*, from the experimental data, to have a final product with desired density and microstructure (and also with less number of sample rejections). It is reported that the theory of Master Sintering Curve (MSC) provides a powerful tool to predict the densification behaviour during sintering under different thermal profiles for a chosen powder processing method [6,7]. For a given powder and green body, the instantaneous relationship between activation energy of sintering, Q and relative physical density (ρ) could be established through the construction of an MSC [6,7]. Considering, only one diffusion mechanism (either volume diffusion or grain boundary diffusion) and microstructure is only density (ρ) dependent, the MSC can be

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constructed by the equation as given by,

$$\Phi(\rho) = \Theta(t, T(t)) \equiv \int_0^t \frac{1}{T} exp\left(-\frac{Q}{RT}\right) dt \quad (1)$$

where, Q is the activation energy of sintering, T is the absolute temperature, t is the time, R is the gas constant and $\Phi(\rho)$ is related to the microstructural evolution and $\Theta(t,\ T(t))$ is a function of the thermal history.

The model of MSC, in the recent past, has been applied successfully to many of the ceramic oxides such as ThO_2 [8], ZnO [6,9], Al_2O_3 [6], Al_2O_3+5% ZrO_2 [6], 3Y-TZP [10], 8YSZ and Al_2O_3 doped 8YSZ [11]. However, little attention has been paid to the studies on the formulation of MSC for lead-free alkali niobate ceramics. In the present work, from the non-isothermal sintering experiment(s), an MSC is constructed for the $Li_{0.12}Na_{0.88}NbO_3$ (LNN-12) composition to predict the densification behaviour and also to estimate the activation energy of sintering.

2. Experimental

All the LNN-12 samples in this study were prepared from the reagent-grade Nb_2O_5, Na_2CO_3 (both 99.5% pure, Loba Chemie, India) and Li_2CO_3 (99.0% pure, Merck, India). These were mixed in the desired stoichiometry of $Na_{1-x}Li_xNbO_3$ (x=0.12), and wet ball milled in alcohol to obtain proper mixing and a surface-active fine powder. After solid state reacted at 900 °C for 4 h in air to achieve single phase powder, the reacted powder was reground and average volume particle size distribution was measured using laser diffraction particle size analyzer (Beckman Coulter, LS 13 320). The powder was then pressed uniaxially into cylindrical pellets of 10 mm diameter and 14.5 mm length using pressure of 450 MPa. Linear shrinkage (from room temperature to 1300°C) of the cylindrical pellet was recorded in the axial direction using a 2016STD (Orton, USA) push rod type dilatometer, calibrated using standard alumina sample (Orton, USA) under heating rate 10 °Cmin^{-1}. Both, the temperature and the length of the sample were recorded continuously with the help of a thermocouple and a linear voltage differential transducer (LVDT) respectively. The phase formation was confirmed from the powder X-Ray Diffraction (XRD) data and theoretical density (TD) was calculated from the calculated lattice parameters of the LNN-12 sample using Rietveld refinement technique as implemented in the computer programme package FullProf 2000 [12].

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Powder characterization

For the samples, clean single phase (orthorhombic) polycrystalline LNN-12 formation was confirmed from the XRD pattern wherein all the peak positions matched well with the JCPDS#033 1270 [13]. Rietveld refinements of the XRD data were carried out by selecting the space group

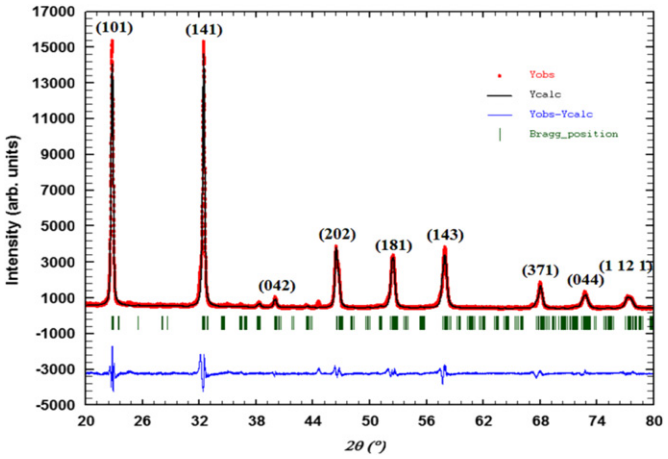

Fig. 1. (Colour online) Powder XRD pattern of a nominal LNN-12 sample in the space group $Pc2_1b$. The dots represent the observed data points and the solid lines their Rietveld fit.

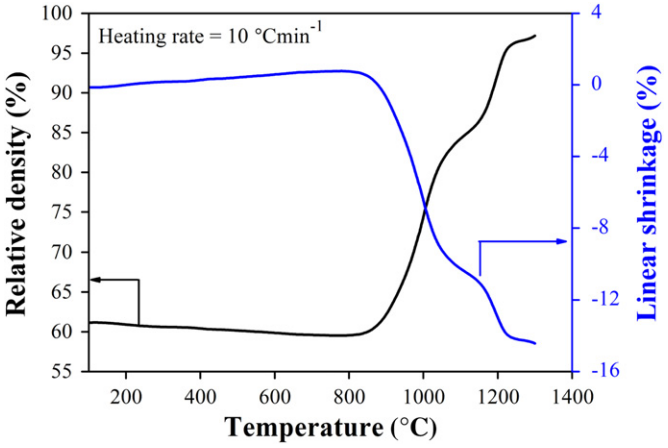

Fig. 2. (Colour online) Relative density (%) and normalized linear shrinkage profile of LNN-12 green compacted sample over a temperature range. The sintering of the sample commences above 800 °C.

$Pc2_1b$ (29) [14]. Fig. 1 depicts the observed, calculated and different XRD profiles of the LNN-12 sample after the final cycle of refinement.The refined unit cell parameters, unit cell volume are found to be a=5.5083(Å), b=15.5406 (Å), c=5.5414 (Å), V_{cell}=474.36 (Å^3) respectively. Theoretical density (TD)=4.53 g/cc was calculated from the above refined lattice parameters. Average particle size $\overline{d} \sim 0.69$ μm was measured using laser diffraction particle size analyzer.

3.2. Densification

Both, the relative density (%) and normalized linear shrinkage ($\Delta L/L_0$) versus temperature (T°C) curves for a green compacted LNN-12 sample, subjected to a heating rate of 10 °C min^{-1}, from room temperature to 1300 °C, in air, is shown in Fig. 2. The shrinkage (ΔL) values were converted into relative density by assuming isotropic