

Grain growth control in Nb-doped BaTiO₃

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Received 19 September 2003; received in revised form 13 January 2005; accepted 3 February 2005

Abstract

In this work, the grain growth inhibition effect of Nb₂O₅ on BaTiO₃ was improved by employing selected raw materials and an advanced milling technique. BaTiO₃ prepared from crystalline TiO₂ powder and needle-shaped BaCO₃ led to large grains on sintering, in addition to second phases due to Ti segregation and non-complete Nb incorporation. These phases did not inhibit grain growth but they affected the permittivity–temperature dependence of the material. In these materials, compensation charge mechanisms by electrons provided semiconducting characteristics at room temperature.

Further modifications on materials selection and ceramic processing varied the Nb incorporation extent significantly. Mechanochemically activated BaCO₃ reactant and ultrafine TiO₂ led to an early reaction. It provided a wide temperature range for Nb⁵⁺ incorporation as the BaCO₃–TiO₂ reaction progressed. Complete, homogeneous Nb incorporation in these materials allowed a strong grain growth inhibition on sintering and avoided accumulation of needle-shaped phases. Simultaneously to the grain growth inhibition phenomenon a considerable increase in titanium vacancy concentration was detected. Resulting materials stabilized in a pseudocubic phase and showed high dielectric features at room temperature.

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Keywords: Powders–solid state reaction; Defects; Microstructure; Dielectric properties; BaTiO₃ and titanates

1. Introduction

Barium titanate and its solid solutions have been extensively used in many technical applications due to their ferroelectric properties [1–5]. Owing to the strong dependence of ferroelectric properties on grain size and compositional aspects, microstructural control has become very important [6]. It is well known that grain growth can be successfully controlled by the incorporation of small amounts of fine sized particles such as Nb₂O₅, Sb₂O₃, La₂O₃ and others [7–9]. Incorporation of donors above 0.3 mol% of additive oxide leads to an extraordinary change in BaTiO₃ properties. Below this doping threshold, coarse-grained BaTiO₃ becomes a semiconductor. On further dopant addition, BaTiO₃ ceramics show a fine-grained microstructure and insulating characteristics. This phenomenon, usually referred to as the “doping anomaly”, is closely related to the microstructure and defect

charge compensation modes [10]. Also, it was found that different doping styles modified the additive incorporation and the grain growth control [11,12].

Application of BaTiO₃ in ferroelectric devices requires a high density and homogeneous microstructure with grain sizes around 1 μm. The use of optimized powders and ceramic processing limit the second phase formation, impurity segregation or abnormal grain growth that usually degrades the material features [13]. On this matter, continual industrial effort is focused on improvement in the manufacturing process, so that many advances have been made with sophisticated technologies [14–16]. From the manufacturers viewpoint, an innovative technology should also provide a compromise between low cost process and reliable properties.

The use of an advanced milling step in the BaTiO₃ solid-state process remarkably enhances the grain size distribution, particle reactivity and further sinterability of the ceramic powder. On this matter, the high-energy milling is a conventional ball milling in which the mechanical energy activates chemical reactions at low temperatures [17–19].

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In this work, high-energy milling and optimized reactants have been used to improve traditional BaCO_3 – TiO_2 solid-state synthesis, additive incorporation and particle sinterability. We established a link among processing variables and properties of BaTiO_3 ceramics. In addition to this, the microstructure and electrical properties of the final product were explained in terms of the ionic defect structure.

2. Experimental procedure

Three series of BaTiO_3 -based materials were prepared from commercial BaCO_3 (Lennox Lab. Inc.), TiO_2 and Nb_2O_5 (Fluka A.G., Buchs S.G., medium particle size $1.8\text{ }\mu\text{m}$) via the conventional mixed-oxide route. Two different TiO_2 reactants were alternatively used; that was a highly reactive, amorphous TiO_2 powder (Degussa P25, medium particle size $0.05\text{ }\mu\text{m}$, referred to as F) and a crystalline, coarsened TiO_2 powder (Baker Chem. Co., medium particle size $0.64\text{ }\mu\text{m}$, referred to as G). A standard BaCO_3 previously activated was employed. Activation of BaCO_3 powder was performed in isopropilic medium through high energy milling in a planetary mill with ZrO_2 balls for (A) 4 h (medium particle size $1.20\text{ }\mu\text{m}$) or (B) 10 h (medium particle size $0.90\text{ }\mu\text{m}$).

To ensure the complete reaction of the reactants at high temperature, a BaCO_3 : TiO_2 ratio of 1:1.01 was chosen. To study the influence of processing modifications and raw materials on donor performance, an additive concentration of 0.15 mol% of Nb_2O_5 was fixed. TiO_2 , BaCO_3 and Nb_2O_5 powders were mixed in isopropilic medium using a high-speed turbine at 6000 rpm for 5 min. Dried powders were thermally treated at 1150°C for 2 h and sieved through a $100\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ mesh. The thermally treated powders were referred as P1–P3 (see Table 1).

Powders were uniaxially pressed into disks of 1 cm in diameter and 0.2 cm thick under 20 MPa without a binder or lubricant. Samples were sintered in air at 1350°C for 3 h with a heating/cooling rate of $3^\circ\text{C}/\text{min}$. Finally, electrodes were painted with an Ag–Pd paste.

Thermal events during thermal treatment were analyzed by differential thermal analysis (DTA) (Shimadzu DTA-50), with a heating rate of $3^\circ\text{C}/\text{min}$ up to 1000°C . Density of the sintered samples was measured by Archimedes' Method with distilled water as fluid medium. X-ray diffraction analyses (XRD) were carried out on thermally treated and sintered samples using a Philips 1830, with $\text{Cu K}\alpha$ radiation and Ni filter, at 40 kV and 30 mA. To quantify the cell distortion, tetragonality parameters (c/a) were calculated from the re-

flections of the (1 1 1) and (2 0 0) planes of sintered BaTiO_3 . A scanning rate of $0.125^\circ/\text{min}$ was used. Suitable surface for microstructural analysis was achieved by polishing the samples with SiC paper and diamond paste. Grain boundaries were highlighted in the polished surface through a thermal etching treatment at 1150°C for 10–25 min. Etched samples were analyzed by scanning electron microscopy (SEM) using a Philips 505 microscope, while elemental analyses (EDS) were carried out with an EDAX (Topcon SM-300 and PGT digital spectrometer). By using the Soft Imaging System AnalySIS[®] 3.0 software, evaluation of the average grain size was performed on SEM images. Paramagnetic defects were determined by electron paramagnetic resonance (EPR) spectroscopy on sintered and ground samples, with a Bruker spectrometer (band X) using a gain of 2×10^4 , a power of 5 dB and a modulation amplitude of 6.3 Gpp. For every EPR signal, the double integrated intensity (DII) was calculated as Murugaraj et al. reported in their article [20]. The DII gives the relative concentration of a given ionic defect in the perovskite lattice.

Electrical resistivity at room temperature (ρ_{RT}) was measured with a Keithley 614 Electrometer applying a dc-voltage of 10 V. Capacitance and loss tangent ($\tan \delta$) were recorded from 25 to 125°C with a Hewlett Packard 4284A LCR meter, at 1 and 100 kHz. The real part of the dielectric permittivity (ϵ') was obtained from the measured capacitance.

3. Results and discussion

In Fig. 1, the typical endothermic peak belonging to $\alpha \rightarrow \beta$ transformation of BaCO_3 around 830°C depicted the BaCO_3 amount remaining in the system at that temperature. BaCO_3 peaks were remarkably dependent on mechanochemical activation and titania reaction. In sample P3, BaCO_3 content still present at 830°C was higher than in the systems P1 and P2, where the BaCO_3 decomposition began earlier. As consequence of the reaction delay in P3, there was a narrow temperature range for Nb_2O_5 incorporation while the BaTiO_3 lattice was built. Also, decomposition of slightly activated BaCO_3 followed by its reaction with large TiO_2 particles started at

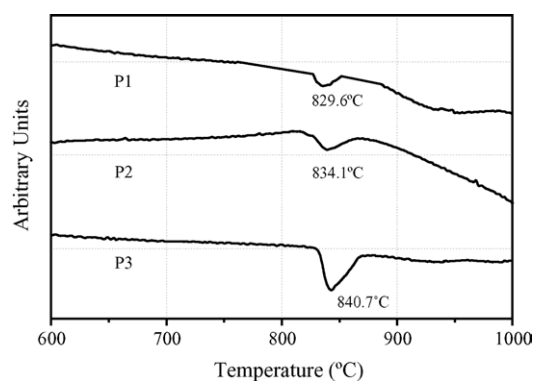


Fig. 1. DTA diagrams for P1–P3 powders prior to sintering.

Table 1
Nomenclature of the samples

Powder	BaCO_3 (milling hours)	TiO_2	Nb_2O_5 (mol%)	Nomenclature of the sintered sample
P1	4	F	0.15	S1
P2	10	F	0.15	S2
P3	4	G	0.15	S3

Table 2
Characteristics of sintered samples S1–S3

Material	Density (%)	Grain size (μm)	Predominant structure	ρ ($\Omega\text{ cm}$)	ϵ_r	$\tan \delta$ (%)
S1	81	5	Pseudocubic	$>10^8$	2200	1.6
S2	94	2	Pseudocubic	$>10^8$	2500	3.2
S3	95	>50	Tetragonal	44	300000	25

higher temperatures (780 °C, determined by XRD) than in P1 or P2. All thermally treated powders at 1150 °C for 2 h proved to be monophasic by XRD.

Samples S2 and S3 showed higher density values than S1 (Table 2). The different densification behavior was also reflected on microstructural characteristics. In Fig. 2, SEM photomicrographs of materials S1–S3 are shown. Homogeneous and fine-grained microstructures were observed in samples S1 and S2. A dramatic grain growth inhibition took place in sample S2. In S1, agglomeration of P1 powder (Fig. 3A) originated large pores on sintering, which were responsible for the density value observed in this ceramic (Fig. 3B and Table 2). In sample S3, needle-shaped second phases were homogeneously formed on sintering, however their formation did not hinder the grain growth. In fact, grains as large as 50 μm were observed. Needle-shaped phases were not observed in S1 and S2 materials sintered at 1350 °C for 2 h. In these cases, EDS analyses performed on non-etched samples revealed the presence of a Ti rich-phase covering the

grains. According to EDS analyses, composition of the second phases was close to $\text{Ba}_6\text{Ti}_{17}\text{O}_{40}$ (in S1 and S2 materials) and $\text{Ba}_6\text{Ti}_{14}\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_{39}$ (in S3).

In all cases, sintering behavior was strongly dependent on BaTiO_3 powder characteristics, which were as expected dependent on the solid-state synthesis. From a previous work [21], significant differences between TiO_2 and BaCO_3 granulometry in P1 led to TiO_2 particle agglomerates (Fig. 3A). In addition, employment of typical needle-shaped BaCO_3 slightly activated (BaCO_3 in P1) and round-shaped TiO_2 resulted in a rather difficult mixing process [22]. Agglomerated TiO_2 particles in P1 (Fig. 3A) could sinter themselves at the beginning of the thermal treatment. As far as BaCO_3 decomposed [21], reaction between BaO and TiO_2 in P1 took place on the external layers of the agglomerates. Finally, BaO diffusion into the TiO_2 agglomerates allowed a complete reaction, thus a monophasic-based BaTiO_3 product was obtained. Since morphology and particle size of TiO_2 powder determine those of the BaTiO_3 , a coarsened powder product was

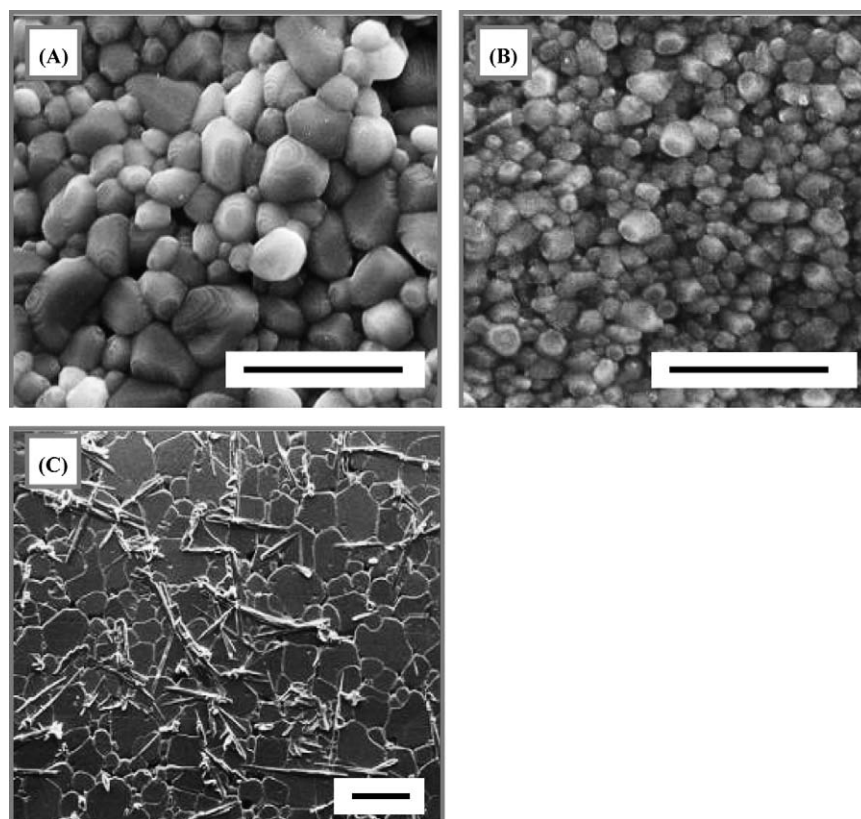


Fig. 2. SEM photomicrographs for S1 (A), S2 (B) and S3 (C) materials. Bar = 10 μm (S1 and S2 samples), and bar = 100 μm (S3 sample).

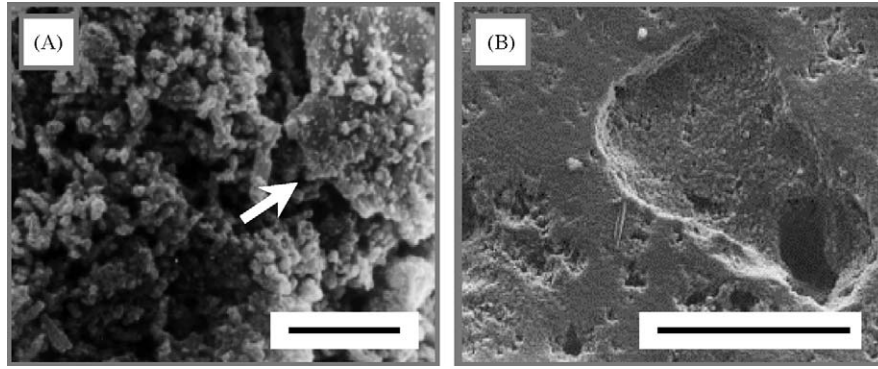


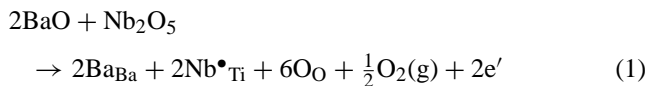
Fig. 3. (A) TiO₂ agglomerate in P1 mixture, bar = 10 μm. (B) Detail of large pore on S1 material, bar = 100 μm.

obtained (P1). On sintering, coarsened BaTiO₃ particles led to higher grain size and a substantial lower density (S1) than the expected without agglomeration (S2).

It is well known that grain growth extent in Nb-doped materials depends on Nb₂O₅ concentration [10,23,24]. However, results in our materials indicated different grain growth for identical Nb doping (Fig. 2). It is likely that granulometry and reactivity of TiO₂ and BaCO₃ also influenced the Nb incorporation on sintering BaTiO₃. Explanation arises by considering the Nb fraction incorporated at the beginning of the solid-state reaction between BaCO₃ and TiO₂. Rigorous activation of BaCO₃ in P2 impelled BaCO₃ decomposition and a subsequent reaction with TiO₂ at very low treatment temperatures (630 °C, determined by XRD). Early incorporation of Nb additive in P2 enabled its grain growth inhibition effect on sintering. Thus, fine-grained ceramics were obtained (S2). In addition to this, originally large TiO₂ particles contributed also to the development of large BaTiO₃ grains in this sample.

In S1 and S2 materials, tetragonal–cubic transformation was blocked as consequence of grain refinement. Thus, the structure became pseudocubic (Fig. 4) instead of purely tetragonal. In S3, tetragonal structure split up into two peaks, as corroborated in Fig. 4 and Table 2. Samples S1 and S2 showed higher resistivities than S3 due to the presence of a higher amount of intergranular barriers. Also, tetragonal phase stabilization in sample S3 favored dominion formation, and the cancellation of intergranular barriers. In this sample a PTCR behavior is observed.

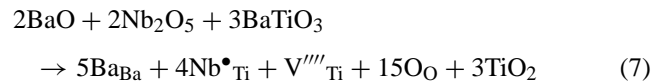
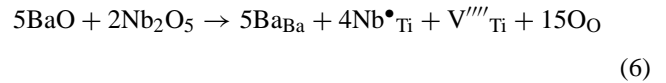
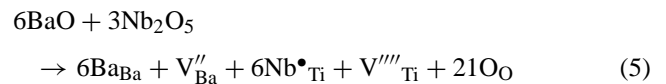
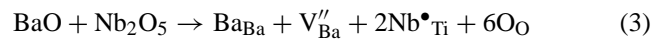
It is known that, the incorporation of Nb⁵⁺ ions at the B-sites of the BaTiO₃ perovskite lattice originated a charge excess to be compensated [25]. Compensation mechanisms depended on the Nb⁵⁺ concentration added. For small Nb⁵⁺ concentrations, electronic compensation should prevail as follows [24,25]:



simultaneously:



When a large number of Nb⁵⁺ ions were incorporated into the lattice, charge disequilibria were compensated by ionic defects. In our system (Ba/Ti < 1):



EPR analysis performed on S1–S3 showed two paramagnetic signals at $g = 2.004$ and 1.974 and six sharp resonance peaks

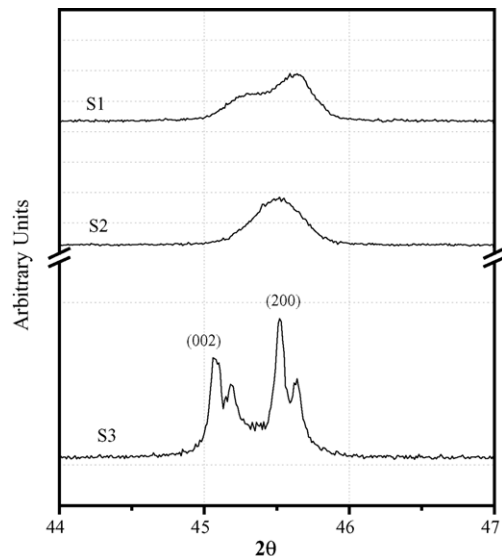


Fig. 4. XRD signals for S1–S3 materials.

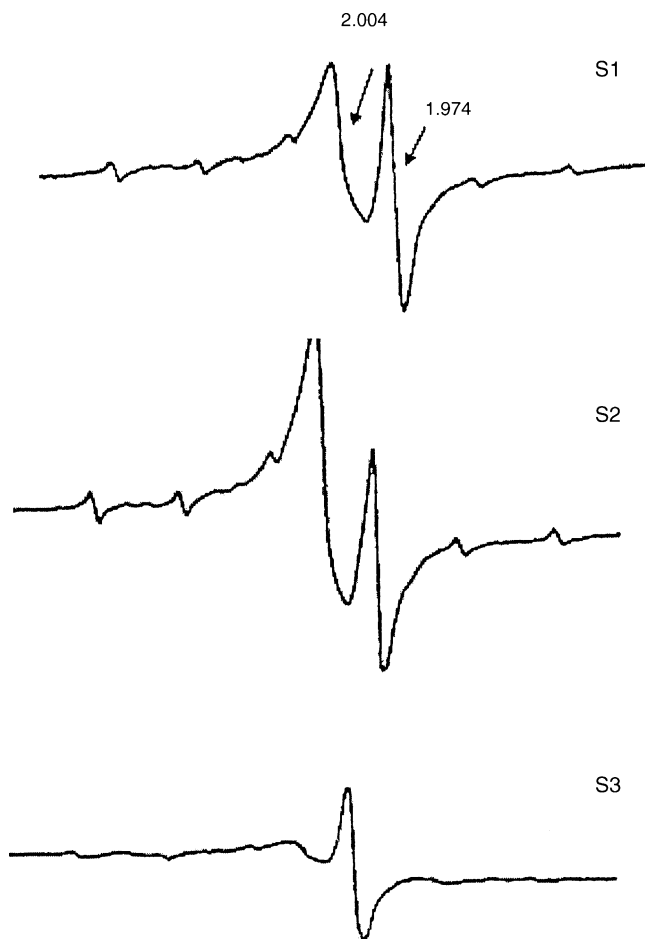


Fig. 5. EPR spectra of S1–S3 samples.

due to the hyperfine splitting of the ^{55}Mn isotope having a nuclear spin of $5/2$ (Fig. 5). Kolodiaznyh and Petric [26] related the EPR singlets with $g = 2.004$ and 1.974 to V_{Ti} (V'_{Ti} or V'''_{Ti}) and V'_{Ba} , respectively. The EPR signal at $g = 1.932$ attributed to Ti^{3+} , $\text{Ti}^{3+}-\text{V}_\text{O}$ or $\text{Ti}^{3+}-\text{V}_\text{O}-\text{K}(\text{Na})$ [27] was not detected in these experiments. V'_{Ba} and V_{Ti} relative concentration determined by EPR depicted Nb^{5+} incorporation semiquantitatively. Table 3 suggests that Eqs. (5)–(7) prevailed for S1 and S2. Major incorporation of Nb ions followed by a titanium vacancy regime led to high-resistivity characteristics in S1 and S2 materials (Tables 2 and 3). Non-complete Nb incorporation in S3 led to electronic and barium vacancies compensation regimes (Eqs. (1) and (3)), in detriment of titanium vacancies formation (Table 3). Electrons passing to the conduction band compensated the charge excess introduced

Table 3

DII values correspondent to barium and oxygen vacancies detected by EPR in samples S1–S3

Material	DII- V_{Ti}	DII- $V \bullet_{\text{Ba}}$
S1	12.7	2.1
S2	18.6	1.0
S3	0.3	1.2

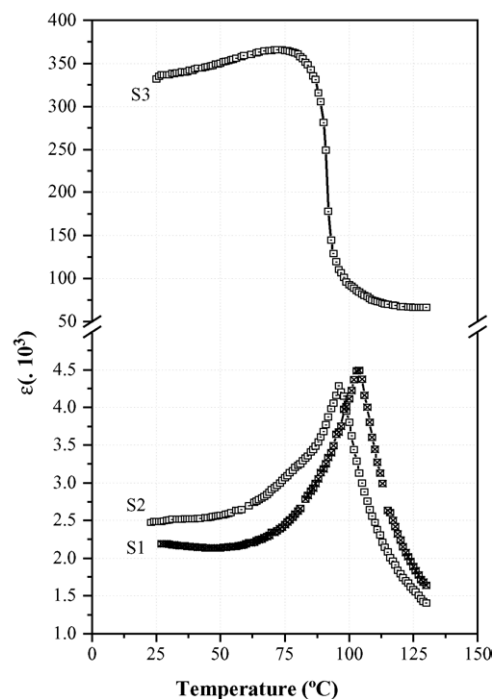


Fig. 6. Real part of the dielectric permittivity vs. temperature dependence at 1 kHz for S1–S3 materials.

by doping, so the electrical resistivity decreased and the loss tangent increased as was experimentally confirmed (Table 2). Evidence of Ti^{3+} (Eq. (2)) was also provided by the blue color of the sintered S3 materials [28].

According to EPR and microstructural results, titanium vacancies, formed by niobium replacement in the BaTiO_3 lattice, played a dominant role in grain growth control. Ionic defects piled up at grain boundaries and decreased grain boundary mobility [29]. On the other hand; Ti-rich secondary phases resulted from Ti segregation from a monophasic BaTiO_3 , as consequence of Nb incorporation (see Eq. (7)).

Fig. 6 shows permittivity versus temperature curves for S1–S3 materials in the temperature range between 25 and 125°C at 1 kHz. Two different responses were observed. On one hand, S1 and S2 materials showed a typical Curie–Weiss behavior with a cubic–tetragonal transition at 104°C and 95°C , respectively. On the other hand, the permittivity peak at the Curie temperature was suppressed in sample S3, with nearly flat temperature dependence in the range between 25 and 95°C . However, when a frequency of 100 kHz was applied, a characteristic Curie–Weiss response in S3 with a transition temperature at 106°C (Fig. 7) was observed. This interesting frequency dependence feature has scarcely been reported for BaTiO_3 materials. A qualitative explanation comes up on considering the different polarization forms leading to given permittivity features, in dependence on the driving frequency of the electric field. There are a number of relaxation effects depending on frequency and temperature described in the literature [30]. In materials like S3 where at least two phases

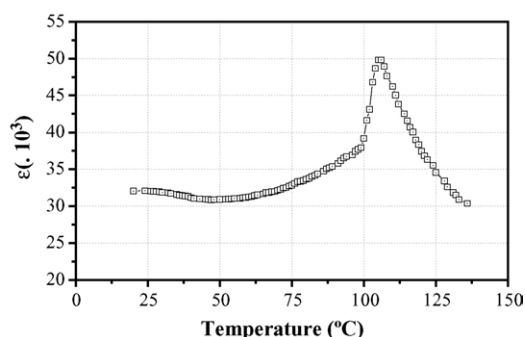


Fig. 7. Real part of the dielectric permittivity vs. temperature dependence at 100 kHz for S3 material.

coexist, interfacial polarization could be associated to the movement of free charges across a potential barrier separating two phases under the effect of an electric field. In such a case, movement of free charges through long distances compared with molecular distances requires a long time to relax, therefore the process is only possible at low frequencies [30,31]. When the temperature is changed the dipole polarization is influenced [32]. It is known that two cases are possible: (a) for higher temperatures it will be more difficult to orient the dipoles by the applied field due to the thermal agitation energy, and (b) the higher the temperature the higher the density of dipoles available contributing to the total polarization. This dielectric relaxation, which obeys an Arrhenius type thermal activation law, partially masks the ferroelectric–paraelectric transition at low frequencies. At higher frequencies the influence of the relaxation process on the relative permittivity was reduced and a ferroelectric–paraelectric transition peak was observed.

4. Conclusions

Reactant characteristics and ceramic processing played a decisive role on Nb incorporation into the BaTiO₃ lattice. That dependence was also observed in relation to the defect structure at room temperature. Experimental results disclosed that titanium vacancies depended on the TiO₂ granulometry and BaCO₃ milling time. Charged titanium vacancies could be associated with impurities at the grain boundaries. The moving boundary must drag along the defects, thus retarding grain growth.

In materials with a low Nb⁵⁺ incorporation, needle-shaped second phases were spread over a wide bulk area and they did not inhibit grain growth on sintering. In such case, electronic compensation mechanisms allowed the boundary mobility to approach a maximum. Then, large grains were developed on sintering.

In materials with high Nb⁵⁺ incorporation, high amount of titanium vacancies was developed. These vacancies contributed to grain growth inhibition on sintering.

Electrical properties were closely related with the compensating defect mode induced by additive incorporation.

Also, additive incorporation was strongly dependent on raw materials and processing. Optimization of milling technology and appropriate reactant selection modified the additive effect to achieve desired features for dielectric or semiconductor devices.

Acknowledgement

Support of this work was provided by Fundación Antorchas, CONICET, as well as Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata.

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