Fluorescence Upconversion Properties of Er$^{3+}$-Doped TiO$_2$ and BaTiO$_3$ Nanocrystallites

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The effects of the erbium concentration, crystal size, crystal phase, and different processing temperatures on the upconverted emission of Er$^{3+}$ in BaTiO$_3$ and TiO$_2$ nanocrystals are reported. A cw diode laser at 975 nm was used as a pump source for resonant sequential excitation of the $^4I_{11/2}$ and $^4F_{7/2}$ levels. Green and red upconversion emission at 550 and 670 nm were observed from these oxide nanocrystals with 975 nm excitation. With the same Er$^{3+}$ concentration, the upconversion emission intensity from BaTiO$_3$ was higher than that observed in the TiO$_2$ host. In the TiO$_2$ matrix, the maximum upconversion emission intensity of Er$^{3+}$ was found for samples calcined at 800 °C where both the anatase and the rutile phases were present. The observed emission characteristics and the pump intensity dependence of the luminescence intensity confirm that the upconverted emission in these materials is produced by two-photon excited-state absorption (ESA) processes.

Introduction

Rare-earth-doped materials find usage in a wide variety of applications, including phosphors, display monitors, X-ray imaging, scintillators, lasers, and amplifiers for fiber-optic communications.1-3 Recently, a great deal of research on 1R-to-visible frequency upconversion has been focused to find their potential applications in several areas, such as upconversion lasing, display, and two-photon imaging by confocal microscopy.4-6 The predominant mechanisms of upconversion in these materials are excited-state absorption (ESA) and energy-transfer upconversion (ETU). In both of these cases, a simple cw diode laser can be used for the upconversion process, in contrast to expensive mode-locked lasers used for two-photon upconversion in organic fluorophores.7 Efficient upconverting inorganic nanocrystals can be a good replacement for the organic dyes used for two-photon confocal-microscope imaging. The efficiency of these materials is dependent on the excited-state dynamics of the rare-earth ions and their interactions with the host matrix. This interaction can be a function of the host phase and the dopant concentration. The excited-state dynamics are also dependent on energy migration between the active ions, statistical distribution of the active ions, and the site symmetry of the active ions in the host matrix.8-12 With a suitable selection of the host matrix and the rare earth dopant ion concentration, the upconversion performance of a material can be enhanced significantly. Here we report the study of the interaction of Er$^{3+}$ with TiO$_2$ and BaTiO$_3$ nanocrystals, in relation to the Er$^{3+}$ upconversion properties.

Experimental Section

The sol–emulsion–gel method was used for the preparation of Er$^{3+}$-doped oxide nanoparticles.8 The flowchart in Figure 1 summarizes the synthetic approach used for the preparation of Er$^{3+}$-doped nanoparticles. Titanium isopropoxide, Ti(OiPr)$_4$, (Fluka) was used as the precursor for titania sol preparation. Required amounts of acetic acid (5.27 mL) and 2-butanol (135 mL) were used to prepare the sol. The requisite amount (20 mL) of titanium isopropoxide was added to half of the mixture of acetic acid and 2-butanol and the resultant sol was stirred for 30 min. Water (2.53 mL) was added to the remaining amount of the acid–alcohol mixture and the resulting solution was added dropwise
to the alkoxide–alcohol–acid mixture with stirring. The sol was then stirred for another 1 h. Then the required amount of erbium acetate was added to this sol.

Barium acetate (Ba(CH₃COO)₂ · H₂O), titanium isopropanoxide (Ti(OiPr)₄, from Fluka), and erbium acetate were used as the starting materials for BaTiO₃ sol preparation. First Ba(Ac)₂ was dissolved in water and acetic acid under stirring. Second, the required amount of titania sol (see above) was slowly added to this solution under vigorous stirring at ambient temperature. A clear transparent sol was thus obtained. Then the required amount of erbium acetate was added to this sol. To obtain emulsified sol droplets through water-in-oil (w/o) type emulsions, cyclohexane and sorbitan monooleate (Span 80, Fluka) were used as the organic liquid (oil phase) and the nonionic surfactant, respectively. The support solvent containing 5 vol % of Span 80 in cyclohexane was used for emulsification, i.e., for the preparation of water-in-oil (w/o) type emulsion in the present study. The volume ratio of the sol and cyclohexane was 1:4. A measured amount of the sol was then dispersed in the solvent under stirring condition. The sol droplets formed in the process were then gelled by controlled addition of a base. The gel particles were separated by centrifugation, followed by washing with acetone and methanol. The product thus obtained was dried at 60 °C in an air oven for 12 h. The dried materials were calcined at different temperatures, up to 1000 °C.

Transmission electron microscopy (TEM) was employed to determine the morphology and the particle size of the resulting powders. The crystalline phases of calcined powders were identified by X-ray diffraction (XRD). X-ray powder diffraction patterns of the different samples were recorded at a number of temperatures.

Results and Discussion

Structural Investigations. Figure 2 represents the XRD patterns of Er³⁺-doped TiO₂ nanocrystallites processed at different temperatures. It shows that only the anatase phase appears at 500 °C. The anatase and the rutile phases are present in samples processed at 800 °C. The rutile phase contains a small amount of Er₂Ti₂O₇ crystallites when sintered at 1000 °C. The rutile phase dominates at higher temperature. Thus, the phase transformation can be controlled with annealing temperature. The crystallite size increases with the increasing temperature. Figure 3 shows the TEM picture of these particles. The estimated average crystal sizes (from TEM picture) are 15, 40, and >100 nm for samples processed at 500, 800, and 1000 °C, respectively.

The powder X-ray diffraction patterns in Figure 4 indicate the crystallographic characterization of BaTiO₃ nanoparticles at different temperatures and the patterns show the presence of cubic phases. The crystallite size increases with an increase in the sintering temperature. At higher sintering temperatures, the small crystallite sizes grow larger; as can be seen from the TEM images of the BaTiO₃ nanoparticles shown in Figure 5. The estimated average crystal sizes (from TEM picture) are ~30, 50, and ~80 nm for samples processed at 700, 850, and 1000 °C, respectively.

Upconversion Properties. The energy level diagram describing the upconverted fluorescence emission
from a sample doped with the Er$^{3+}$ ions under infrared excitation is shown in Figure 6.

The upconverted fluorescence spectra of the Er$^{3+}$/TiO$_2$ nanocrystals at different temperatures are shown in Figure 7. The peak located near 480 nm is due to an artifact, not generated in the sample. The spectral nature of the upconversion fluorescence emission depends on the phase. Bahtat et al. have already studied the upconversion fluorescence (blue, green, and red) in an Er$^{3+}$/TiO$_2$ optical planar waveguide. The anatase phase consists of TiO$_6$ octahedrals that share faces; whereas in the rutile phase, the TiO$_6$ octahedrals share only edges. Therefore, the crystal field is different for the Er$^{3+}$ ions in the different crystal phases. Hence, the nature of emission from the anatase and the rutile phases is not identical. The ionic radius value of Er$^{3+}$ is between that of Ti$^{4+}$ (0.068 nm) and O$^{2-}$ (0.10 nm). Therefore the Er$^{3+}$ could either replace some Ti$^{4+}$ sites or go to the interstitial. The Er$^{3+}$ ions that have replaced the Ti$^{4+}$ sites will have a stabilizing effect on the Ti–O bond because the more electropositive Er$^{3+}$ will render its electron density to O$^{2-}$ so that it can use this increased concentration of electrons to strengthen the bonding between O$^{2-}$ and the less electropositive Ti$^{4+}$ ions. It is noted that the luminescence value is highest for the 800 °C calcined samples where both phases are present. However, the luminescence value decreases in the rutile phase present in the 1000 °C heated samples, even though the particle size increases with the increasing temperature. Newport et al. also reported a similar type behavior for TiO$_2$-doped silica glass ceramic materials. The upconversion fluorescence spectra for the 0.25 mol % Er$^{3+}$/TiO$_2$ nanoparticles sintered at three different temperatures are shown in Figure 7. The upconversion luminescence values are 97.35, 207.5, and 120.5 Cd/m$^2$ for the 500, 800, and 1000 °C sintering temperatures, respectively. It is clear from the absolute luminescence values and the spectra shown in Figure 7 that the optimum upconversion is obtained at 800 °C when both the phases are present. Therefore, the variation of upconversion with the Er$^{3+}$ ion concentration was recorded only for samples processed at 800 °C. It can be seen in Figure 8 that the luminescence values of upconversion first increase and then decrease with an increasing concentration of the Er$^{3+}$ ion. These results indicate that in the TiO$_2$ nanoparticles, the upconversion process depends not only on the crystal phase but also on the Er$^{3+}$ concentration.

The upconverted fluorescence spectra of the Er$^{3+}$/BaTiO$_3$ nanocrystals calcined at 1000 °C for different concentrations of Er$^{3+}$ are shown in Figure 9. The upconversion luminescence values in the Er$^{3+}$/BaTiO$_3$ are 17 130, 9487, 1653, and 540 Cd/m$^2$ for 0.25, 1.0, 2.5, and 10 mol % Er$^{3+}$, respectively. A significant drop in the overall intensity and a change in the spectral nature of these bands are observed with increasing concentration of Er$^{3+}$ ions. Figure 10 shows the upconverted fluorescence emission spectra of the 1.0 mol % Er$^{3+}$-doped BaTiO$_3$ nanoparticles prepared at three different sintering temperatures. The upconversion luminescence values are 343, 1448, and 9487 Cd/m$^2$ for the samples made...
at 700, 850, and 1000 °C sintering temperatures, respectively. In this case, we have the same crystal phase (cubic) with different temperatures, but the particles size increases with the increasing processing temperature. This indicates that the upconversion process is dependent not only on the Er\(^{3+}\) concentration but also on the particle size. As shown in Figure 5, increasing the sintering temperature yields larger nanoparticles. Considering the size of the Er\(^{3+}\) ion (~0.10 nm) is almost intermediate between those of the Ba\(^{2+}\) ion (~0.14 nm) and the Ti\(^{4+}\) ion (~0.06 nm), it seems equally likely that the Er\(^{3+}\) ions occupy the site of either ion in the BaTiO\(_3\) lattice. At low concentration (0.25 mol %), the mean distance between the Er\(^{3+}\) ions is estimated by \(R = 0.62(N)^{1/3}\) to be 1.81 nm, but the distance is 0.84 nm for high concentration (2.5 mol %).\(^{15}\) The erbium ions in low concentration are usually randomly distributed in the host lattice and the Er\(^{3+}\)-Er\(^{3+}\)
distances are too far apart, but at higher concentration
the distances between two Er$^{3+}$ ions are shortening, thus leading to formation of Er$^{3+}$ clusters. As a result, concentration-quenching processes will be the predominant nonradiative decay processes at higher concentrations. It is shown that the probability for dopant pair-state formation depends on the size of the particles. Also, the contribution of ions at the surface sites becomes increasingly important as the size decreases. As a result, for the same concentration of dopant ions, the fraction of pairs will be different for different particle sizes. In normal crystal, the surface does not influence the statistics for pair formation because the number of nearest-neighbors is lower at the surface. However, the fraction of dopant ion-pairs for a given concentration at different particle sizes is dependent. Therefore, it could be the reason for an increased upconversion luminescence value with the increasing size for the same concentration. Silver et al. have also shown that the upconversion process is most efficient for larger particles. However, they have suggested that resonance energy transfer is responsible for efficient upconversion in larger particles, because resonance energy transfers extends the lifetimes of the excited states of the rare-earth ions.

The intensity ratio of the green emission to that of the red emission decreases with the increasing concentration of Er$^{3+}$ ions. For example, in the 0.25 mol % sample, the ratio becomes 3:1, whereas in the 2.5 mol % sample we obtain a ratio of 0.888:1. On the other hand, higher concentration favors the red emission. The upconversion luminescence values are 120.5 and 17 130 Cd/m$^2$ for the 1000 °C heated 0.25 mol % Er$^{3+}$-doped TiO$_2$ and BaTiO$_3$ samples, respectively. These results can be explained from the phonon energies of this host. The stretching frequency of the TiO$_2$ matrix is about 641 cm$^{-1}$, which is higher than the phonon frequency in the BaTiO$_3$ matrix. The perovskite oxide (BaTiO$_3$) matrix has low-frequency soft transverse optical (TO) mode. The low phonon energies reduce the probability of a multiphonon nonradiative process. The presence of large energy gaps between the emission and the terminal levels will also reduce the nonradiative decay. This reduction in nonradiative decay leads to an increase in the emission efficiency. Capobianco et al. have shown bands at 1500 and 3350 cm$^{-1}$ which are due to vibrational modes of carbonates and hydroxyl ions, respectively. They have stated that the presence of these bands in the nanocrystals influence the multiphonon relaxation process. As a result, the efficiency decreases in nanocrystals compared to that in bulk. However, we have not observed any such bands at 1000 °C heat-treated samples, but very weak bands at 3424, 1637.47, and 1450 cm$^{-1}$ are observed for the 700 °C heat-treated samples.

Figure 8. Upconverted fluorescence emission spectra of different concentrations of Er$^{3+}$ in TiO$_2$ nanoparticles heated to 800 °C.

Figure 9. Upconverted fluorescence emission spectra of different concentrations of Er$^{3+}$ in BaTiO$_3$ nanoparticles heated to 1000 °C.

Figure 10. Upconverted fluorescence emission spectra of 1.0 mol % Er$^{3+}$-doped BaTiO$_3$ nanoparticles heated to three different temperatures.

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Figure 11. Variation of the red and green upconverted fluorescence emission intensities with pump power, for the 0.25 Er3+/TiO2 sample calcined at 800 °C.

Figure 12. Variation of the red and green upconverted fluorescence emission intensities with pump power, for the 1.0 Er3+/BaTiO3 sample calcined at 1000 °C.

The mechanism of the upconverted emission of Er3+ is well established in the literature. In the ESA process, the diode-laser wavelength (975 nm) induces a transition between the ground state, 4I15/2, and the excited level 4I11/2. After first-level excitation, the same laser pumps the excited ion from 4I11/2 to 4F7/2. The 4F7/2 (Er3+) state decays nonradiatively to 4S3/2/2H11/2 and 4F9/2 (Er3+) levels. The green emission (550 nm) is observed for the 4S3/2 → 4I11/2 transition, while the 4F9/2 → 4I15/2 transition produces red emission (675 nm). At low dopant concentration, the 4S3/2/2H11/2 levels decay mostly radiatively to 4I15/2. Therefore, the green emission has a higher intensity. It is reported that at a higher concentration, the luminescence lifetime of the 4S3/2/2H11/2 levels are shortened as a result of cross-relaxation (CR) processes between (2H11/2 → 4I9/2) and (4I15/2 → 4I13/2) transitions as shown in Figure 3. This cross-relaxation process is dominant at higher concentrations of Er3+ ions. Therefore, quenching of green emission takes place at higher concentrations of erbium ions. There is a possibility for the existence of the erbium ions at a different lattice site that prevents the aggregation, resulting in the circumvention of the nonradiative cross-relaxation process: (2H11/2 → 4I9/2)/(4I15/2 → 4I13/2). Therefore, the 4S3/2/2H11/2 levels decay mostly radiatively to the 4I13/2 level and an overall increase in the green emission intensity is observed.

The intensity of the upconverted luminescence $I_f$ is proportional to some power $n$ of the pump intensity $I_p$, where $n$ is the order of the upconversion process. The variations of the fluorescence intensity of the green and red emission versus the pump intensity for various compositions are plotted in Figures 11 and 12. For a two-photon ESA upconversion process, the fluorescence intensity should be related to the pump intensity by the following equation

$$I_f = \frac{K I_p^n}{(1 + A I_p + B I_p^n)}$$

(2)

where all the coefficients are always positive. $I_f$ is the upconverted fluorescence intensity and $I_p$ is the pumping intensity. $K$ is a constant that depends on the collection geometry, the Er3+ density, and the absorption cross-section of the first and second excited states of Er3+. $A$ and $B$ are constants related to the transition probabilities and the absorption cross-section of the involved transitions. Variations of fluorescence intensity with pump power for all the samples were recorded. Figures 11 and 12 show the curves corresponding to the most efficient upconverting samples. The theoretical fits using eq 2 are also shown in Figures 11 and 12. It can be seen that eq 2 provides an excellent fit to all sets of experimental data. These results further confirm that an ESA process is predominately responsible for upconversion in these materials.

Conclusions

We have shown that the overall upconversion luminescence intensity depends on the crystal structure, concentration, and particles size. We suggest that concentration quenching is responsible for the decrease in overall intensity at higher concentrations. For the same concentration of Er ions, a BaTiO3 host showed a higher upconversion emission intensity than the TiO2 host. In the TiO2 matrix, the maximum upconversion emission intensity of Er3+ was found for the 800 °C calcined samples where both the anatase and the rutile phases were present. In the case of the BaTiO3 host, the upconversion emission intensity increases with the increasing particle size. We have also confirmed that the upconversion process in all these materials involves a two-photon excited-state absorption mechanism.

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