

## Original Research Article

# SYNTHESIS AND CHARACTERIZATION OF ZINC OXIDE (ZNO) THIN FILMS FOR SOLAR CELL APPLICATIONS USING SOL-GEL AUTO COMBUSTION TECHNIQUE.

## ABSTRACT

Zinc oxide (ZnO) nano particles were prepared using sol-gel auto combustion method from Zinc acetate dehydrate and sodium hydroxide. Their structural, morphological, optical and electrical properties were studied. X-ray diffraction (XRD) analysis revealed the film's hexagonal wurtzite phase with preferred (101) grain orientation. The mean crystallite size calculated using the Debye-Scherrer model was 23nm with lattice parameters  $a=0.3255\text{nm}$  and  $c=0.5185\text{nm}$  (CF. JCPDS 361451) and small dislocation density of  $1.8 \times 10^{-3}\text{nm}^{-2}$ , which shows the presence of few lattice defects and very good crystallinity. Scanning electron microscope (SEM) micrographs revealed the film granular porous structure composed of collections of hexagonal columnar grains in a direction normal to the substrate surface and an average grain size of around 198.86nm. The UV-Vis room temperature optical absorption coefficient was analysed using the transmission spectra data and the optical band gap energy was estimated to be around 3.3eV. A low electrical resistivity value of  $2.35 \times 10^{-4}\Omega\text{m}$  was obtained and a high value of carrier charge mobility was found to be  $185\text{cmV}^{-1}\text{S}^{-1}$ . The results of this work are important for applications in semiconductor devices particularly solar cells, optical sources and detectors.

Keywords: Zinc oxide, Sol-gel, ZnO, XRD, SEM.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the past few decades, there has been a paradigm shift in the area of transparent conducting oxide (TCO) thin film research due to their wide use in optoelectronic devices such as touch screen, liquid crystal display, solar cells and light emitting diodes (Muchuweni *et al.*, 2016). TCOs should demonstrate both high electrical conductivity and high optical transparency in the visible region. Indium tin oxide (ITO) is the most widely due to its high transparency to visible light and high electrical conductivity (Sathiaraj *et al.*, 2008; Srivastava *et al.*, 2013). However, there has been a major challenge to find an alternative to ITO because of its high cost, toxicity and scarcity of Indium, which is the principal constituent element of ITO

(Srivastava *et al.*, 2013). The electrical and optical properties of ITO are degraded when exposed to hydrogen plasma environment. To this end, transparent conducting zinc oxide (ZnO) is an attractive substitute material for ITO because of its good optical and electrical properties together with the low cost, non-toxicity and abundance in nature of Zn (Muchuweri *et al.*, 2016). ZnO is an n-type semiconductor material with a wide band gap of 3.3eV and is employed in a variety of applications including electronic devices, biomedical field and variety of sensors (Koklekar *et al.*, 2011). ZnO has large exciton binding energy (60meV) at room temperature (Shinde *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, it has high electromagnetical stability, high thermal stability and good stability in hydrogen plasma, compared to ITO (3, 8, 9, 10, 11). Due to the good electrical stability of the ZnO thin film it has been previously and presently used in organic light emitting diodes [OLEDs] (12,13,14).

The sol-gel auto combustion method is a preferred approach for generating ZnO nanoparticles because of its low cost, dependability, reproducibility, simplicity, and comparatively mild synthesis conditions. Furthermore, the nanoparticles made this way have good optical properties, and the morphology of the particles may be modified by varying the relative rates of hydrolysis and condensation reactions. Controlling these reaction rates, on the other hand, can be problematic. (Lee and colleagues, 2008). According to Byung-ki and coworkers, allowing ammonium carbonate to react with zinc nitrate hydrate produced large surface area ZnO (Byung-ki *et al.*, 1993). Wong and colleagues reported the formation of ZnO particles from zinc acetate with NaOH in 2-propanol at 0°C and 65°C (Wong *et al.*, 2001). Tokumoto and co-workers reported that the products obtained from an ethanolic zinc acetate solution using the sol-gel route depend on catalysts and the temperature of hydrolysis. Unwashed nanoparticulate powders were found to be a mixture of ZnO (Wurtzite), zinc acetate, and zinc hydroxy double salts (Zn-HDS) (Tokumoto *et al.* 2003). Use of ethanol as solvent for preparing ZnO nanoparticles by the reaction of zinc acetate and sodium hydroxide in an ice bath was also reported by Peng and co-workers (Peng *et al.*, 2006). Santilli and colleagues, on the other hand, pointed out that the powders recovered from ethanolic zinc acetate sol-gel suspensions were a combination of nanometer-sized zinc oxide (ZnO) and zinc acetate dihydrate ( $Zn(CH_3COO)_2 \cdot 2H_2O$ ). The order in which these phases formed was unclear (Santilli *et al.*, 2007). In this study, a simple sol-gel autocombustion approach was used to synthesize nanostructured ZnO from zinc acetate dihydrate in water with NaOH. The structural, morphological, optical and electrical features of the ZnO metal oxide nanoparticles obtained were investigated.

## 2.0 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The mean crystallite size (D) using the Debye-Scherrer formula is given by Verka *et al.* (2011).

$$D = \frac{0.9\lambda}{\beta \cos \theta} \dots\dots\dots (1)$$

where  $\lambda$ ,  $\beta$ ,  $\theta$  are the x-ray wavelength (1.541Å), full width at half maximum (FWHM) in radius (corrected for instrumental broadening) and Bragg's diffraction angle respectively.

The dislocation density  $\sigma$  is given by the equation (Wang *et al.*, 2003)

$$\sigma = \frac{1}{D^2} \dots\dots\dots (2)$$

where D is the mean crystallite size.

The lattice parameters a and c can be calculated (Prieur *et al.*, 2020) using equation

$$\frac{1}{d_{hkl}^2} = \frac{4}{3} \left( \frac{h^2 + hk + k^2}{a^2} \right) + \frac{l^2}{c^2} \dots\dots\dots (3)$$

where  $d_{hkl}$  is the inter planner spacing obtained from Bragg's law, and h, k and l are the miller indices denoting the plane.

The Zn-O bond length (L) is given by the equation

$$L = \sqrt{\left( \frac{a^2}{3} + \left( \frac{1}{2} - u \right)^2 c^2 \right)} \dots\dots\dots (4)$$

and  $U = \frac{a^2}{3c^2} + \frac{1}{4} \dots\dots\dots (5)$

where u is the wurtzite structure parameter. The optical band gap ( $E_g$ ) can be estimated using the Tauc model in the absorption region, given in equation (Muchuweni *et al.*, 2016)

$$(\alpha h\nu)^2 = B(h\nu - E_g) \dots\dots\dots (6)$$

where  $h\nu$  is the energy of the incident photon and B is an energy-Independent constant.  $E_g$  can be found from the Tauc plot of  $(\alpha h\nu)^2$  versus  $h\nu$  by extrapolating the linear portion of the absorption edge to  $(\alpha h\nu) = 0$ . And  $\alpha$  is the optical absorption coefficient which can be calculated in the strong absorption region using Beer-Lambert law in equation (7).



dissolved in 25 ml of distilled water respectively, and stirred with a constant magnetic stirrer. Then, 100 ml of ethanol dropwise was added to the solution containing both sodium hydroxide and zinc acetate, 9 gm of Polyvinyl pyrrolidone (PVP k-30, M.W -40000 LOBA Chemie) was added to serve as the chelating agent. All the starting materials were used without further purification, the solution was continuously stirred and heated at a temperature of 80-100 ° C until the water evaporated completely by forming a brown gel. The obtained brown gel was placed on a hot plate and heated to a temperature range of 280-300 ° C for 3 hours in order to obtain the precursor. The precursor material was then calcined at a temperature of 600 ° C for 4 hours.

Film Thickness was measured using a 2D surface profilometer (Alpha-step 0-100, KLA-Tencor, USA). Structural properties were examined by an X-ray diffraction system operated at 40kv and 40mA using Cu= $\alpha$  radiation  $\lambda = 1.5418\text{\AA}$  collected at 20-80° phase size 0.01°. Bruker AXSD8 advanced diffractometer.

The surface morphology was characterized by scanning electron microscope (SEM) operating at 2.00kv. Optical transmittance measurements were performed using a UV/VIS/NIR spectrophotometer, (Perkin-Elmer, America). In the 250-700nm wavelength range. Electrical properties were evaluated from the current-voltage (I-V) characteristics measurements using the four-point probe equipment. The charge carrier mobility of the ZnO was also determined using Hall effect.

## **4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **4.1 Structural Properties**

Figure 1 shows the XRD pattern of the deposited ZnO thin films. All the diffraction peaks were indexed to ZnO with hexagonal wurtzite crystal structure. The appearance of weak diffraction peaks corresponding to the (200), (004) and (202) planes of ZnO suggested the presence of some randomly oriented grains. There was a strong ZnO peak along (101) plane at  $2\theta = 36.20$  indicating that the films grow perpendicular to the substrate. This is in good agreement with the findings of Verka *et al.*, (2011).

The mean crystallite size (D) was evaluated according to broadening of the highest intensity peak corresponding to the (101) diffraction plane using Debye-Scherrer formula shown in equation (1) and was found to be 23nm. The dislocation density ( $\sigma$ ) was calculated from D using equation (2) and was found to be  $1.8 \times 10^{-3} \text{nm}^{-2}$ . This is in good agreement with the

findings of Muchuweni *et al.* (2017), were they got a dislocation density ( $\sigma$ ) of  $1.7 \times 10^{-3} \text{ nm}^{-2}$ . This lower value for sigma implies that the film has very few lattice defects and good crystalline qualities. The lattice parameters  $a$  and  $c$  were calculated using equation (3) and was found to be  $3.25 \text{ \AA}$  ( $0.3259 \text{ nm}$ ) and  $5.18 \text{ \AA}$  ( $0.5185 \text{ nm}$ ) (CF. JCPDS 361451) respectively. The results were in good agreement with the findings of Muchuweni *et al.* (2017); Kayamata, (2004). The wurtzite structure parameter ( $U$ ) was calculated using equation (5) and was found to be 0.381. The Zn-O bond length ( $L$ ) was calculated using equation (4) and was found to be  $L=1.97 \text{ \AA}$ , which is in good agreement with the findings of Muchuweni *et al.* (2017), were they got a bond length ( $L$ ) of  $1.9767 \text{ \AA}$ .

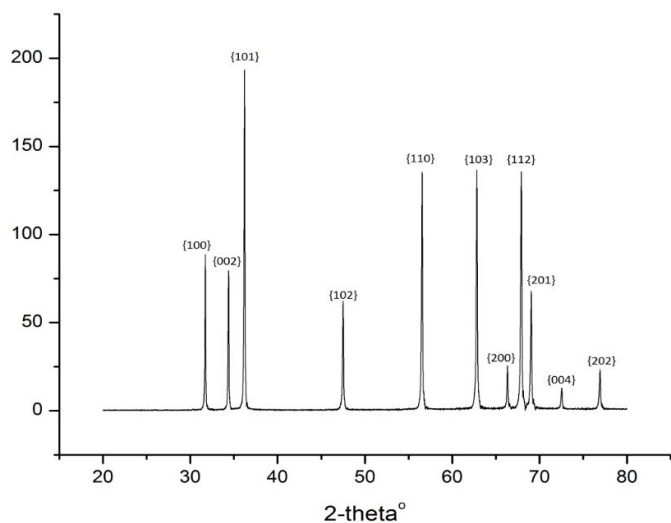


Figure 1. X-ray Diffractogram of Zincite ZnO

## 4.2 Morphological Characteristics

Figures 2a and 2b show SEM micrographs that were taken for ZnO samples annealed at  $600^\circ\text{C}$  for a time of 1 hour and 2 hours respectively. All the samples had a uniform crack free structure. They also revealed granular porous structure. The ZnO Layer contains a collection of hexagonal columnar grains grown in a direction normal to the substrate surface. It was observed that the sample annealed for two hours is more homogenous, dense and crack free than the sample annealed for 1 hour. Thus, at an extended annealing time, a greater rate of vaporization occurred from the grown crystal and the crystal growth that occurred during the annealing process and crystallite formation in the form of small grains. The average grain

size was estimated to be around 198.86nm. The finding is in good agreement with the work of Izaki *et al.* (2007) where they got a grain size 200nm.

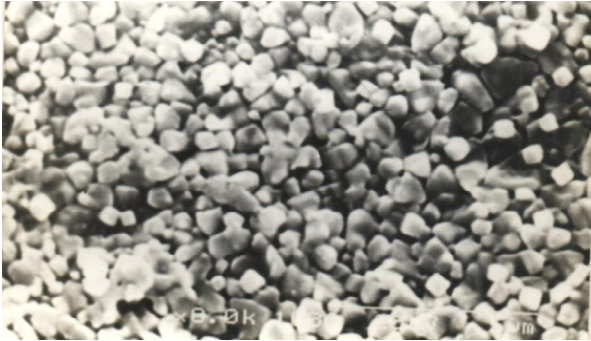


Figure 2a. SEM micrograph of ZnO annealed at a temperature of 600°C for 1 hour.

Figure 2b. SEM micrograph of ZnO annealed at a temperature of 600°C for 2 hours.

### 4.3 Optical Properties

The Tauc’s plot of the UV-Vis spectra graph of  $(\alpha h\nu)^2$  versus  $(h\nu)$ , shown in Figure 3 was plotted for ZnO thin film. By extrapolating the linear portion of the absorption edge to  $(\alpha h\nu)=0$ , the energy band gap was found to be 3.3eV. The result was in concord with previous results of (Katayama, 2004; Muchuweni, 2017; Ream *et al.*, 2022) were they got 3.3eV, 3.28eV and 3.23 respectively.

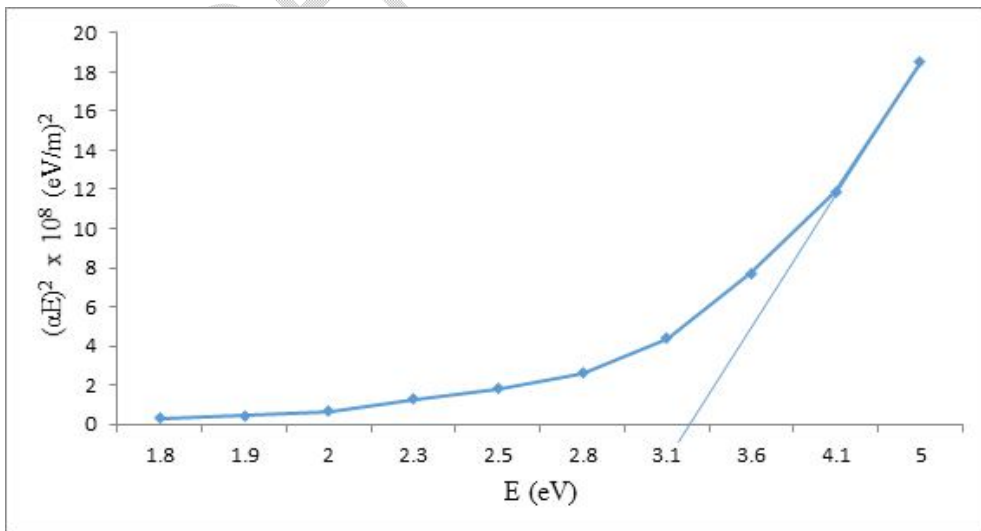


Figure 3. Graphical determination of the optical band gap energy for ZnO

#### 4.4 Electrical Properties

Figure 4 shows the current and corresponding voltages measured through the grown ZnO crystals annealed at a temperature of 600°C for a period of 2 hours. The resistivity of the sample was calculated using equation (8) as  $2.35 \times 10^{-4} \Omega\text{m}$ . The result is in concord with the findings of Getso, (2016) where he got  $2.37 \times 10^{-4} \Omega\text{m}$ . The result is slightly lower because the electrical resistivity of the thin films may be affected by isotropic background scattering (arising from photons and point defects). Similarly, the charge carrier mobility was calculated using equation (14) and was found to be  $185 \text{cm}^2/\text{V}^{-1}\text{S}^{-1}$ , the result agrees with the findings of Mitali *et al.* (2015) where they got  $183.7 \text{cm}^2/\text{V}^{-1}\text{S}^{-1}$ .

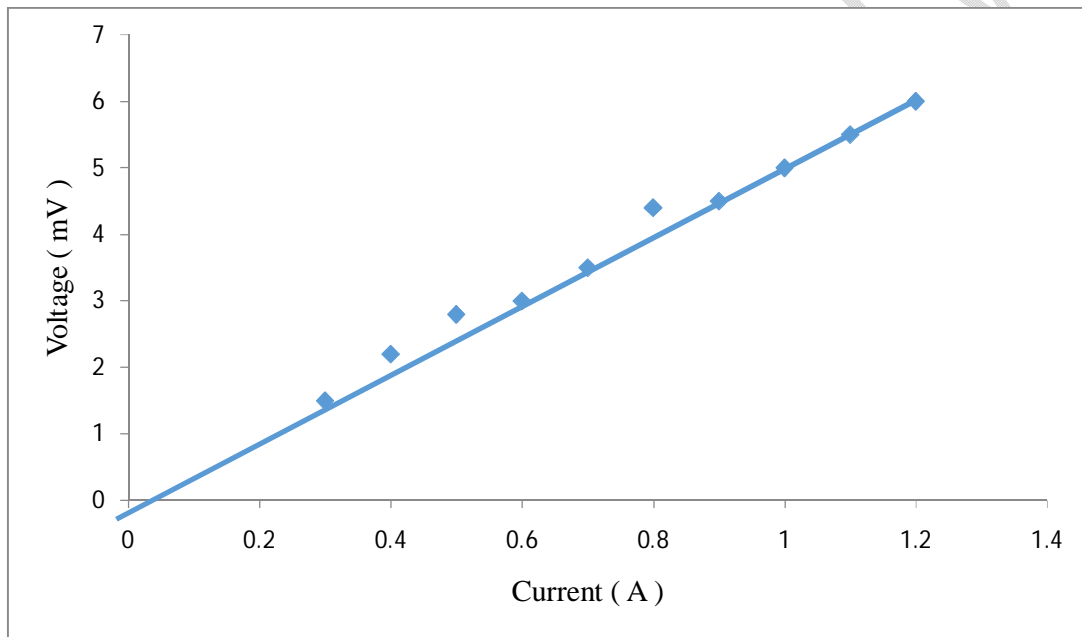


Figure 4. Current- voltage graph from the four-point probe experiment of ZnO

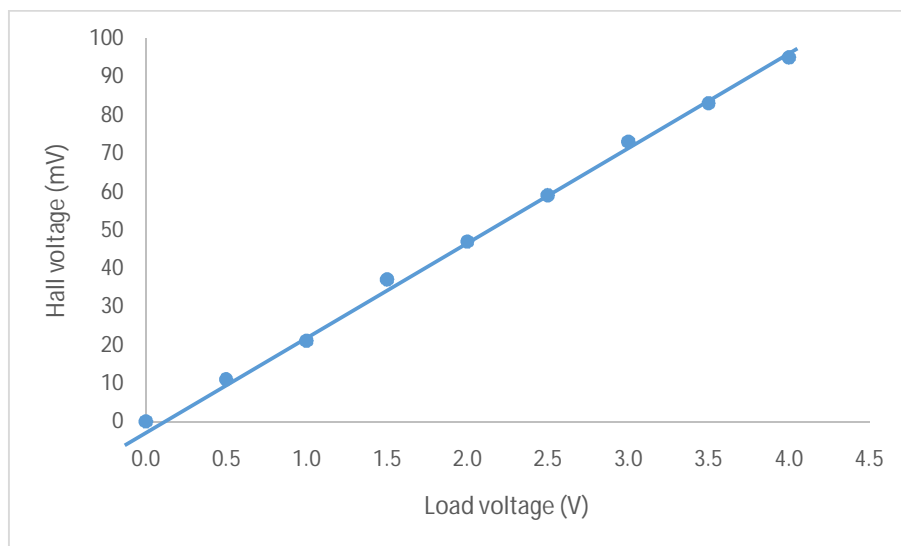


Figure 5:  $V_H$ - $V_L$  graph of the synthesized ZnO crystal

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

The structural, morphological, optical and electrical properties of ZnO thin film were characterized. The film had a hexagonal wurtzite crystal structure with the preferred orientation along the (101) direction. The mean crystallite size was found to be 23nm and the lattice parameters were found to be  $a=0.3255\text{nm}$  and  $c=0.5185\text{nm}$  and small dislocation density of  $1.8 \times 10^{-3} \text{nm}^{-2}$ . SEM micrograph showed film granular porous structure composed of collection of hexagonal columnar grains with an average grain size of 198.86nm. The optical band gap was found to be 3.3eV. A low electrical resistivity of  $2.72 \times 10^{-4} \Omega\text{m}$  indicated the suitability of the ZnO thin film for optoelectronic application.

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