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► To cite this version:

Samantha Bourrioux, Luyuan Paul Wang, Yann Leconte, Madhavi Srinivasan, Zhichuan Xu, et al..
ZnFe₂O₄ nanoparticles synthesis by laser pyrolysis: interest as new anode material for lithium-ion
batteries. 2nd edition Smart Materials and Surfaces, Mar 2016, Incheon, South Korea. cea-02351521

HAL Id: cea-02351521

<https://hal-cea.archives-ouvertes.fr/cea-02351521>

Submitted on 6 Nov 2019

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ZnFe₂O₄ nanoparticles synthesis by laser pyrolysis: interest as new anode material for lithium-ion batteries

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Abstract:

The development of portable devices, electric vehicles and renewable energies has motivated research works about energy storage for years. Existing lithium-ion batteries cannot reach sufficient energy density to address the needs for such applications. One of the issues limiting the energy density is the low specific capacity of the graphite anode (372 mAh.g⁻¹).

Mixed-transition metal oxides with a spinel structure (AB₂O₄ – A, B transition metals) appear as a promising solution to replace graphite with a higher theoretical capacity (between 750 and 1000 mAh.g⁻¹). Nanostructuring of these compounds was studied to maintain mechanical stability and to enhance lithiation kinetics. ZnFe₂O₄ is an interesting substitute to graphite as the storage mechanism gives rise to a theoretical capacity of 1001 mAh.g⁻¹ and among various oxides, ZnFe₂O₄ is cheap, abundant and non-toxic.

Compared with oxides like Fe₂O₃, the combination of two transition metals contributes to lower the working voltage vs. Li/Li⁺ (1.5V for ZnFe₂O₄ vs. 2.1V for Fe₂O₃).

ZnFe₂O₄ nanoparticles were synthesized by laser pyrolysis. In this process, an aerosol containing precursors droplets produced by a nebulizer, is flown into the reactor with a carrier gas. In the reactor, a 10.6 μm-CO₂ laser beam decomposes the precursors to obtain nanopowders which are then collected on a filter. The key advantage of laser pyrolysis is the ability to obtain nanomaterials in large scale with a high purity while controlling the grain size with the appropriate parameters.

Solutions containing Zn(NO₃)₂.6H₂O and Fe(NO₃)₃.9H₂O dissolved in deionized water were used for the synthesis of ZnFe₂O₄ nanoparticles. Ethylene was used as sensitizer gas to absorb the CO₂ laser and allow the decomposition of the precursors whereas air and argon were tested as carrier gases. Powders of different morphologies and crystallinities were obtained and characterized by XRD, SEM, EDX, HRTEM and XPS. ZnO and Fe₂O₃ were also synthesized to compare their electrochemical performances with those of ZnFe₂O₄. All the results were compared with literature.

Keywords: ZnFe₂O₄, nanoparticles, laser pyrolysis, energy storage, lithium-ion battery, anode