Original Article

Evaluating thermal stability of rare-earth containing wasteforms at extraordinary nuclear disposal conditions

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A B S T R A C T

The thermal stability and crystallization behaviors of La2O3 containing B2O3-CaO-Al2O3 glass waste forms were investigated to evaluate the stability of waste form during emergencies in deep geological disposal. For glasses containing 15% La2O3, LaBO3 phases were observed as major crystals from 780 °C and exhibited needlelike structures. Al, Ca, and O were homogeneously distributed throughout the entire specimen, while some portions of B and La were concentrated in some parts. By differential thermal analysis at various heating rates, the activation energy for grain growth and the crystallization rate of LaBO3 were calculated to be 12.6 kJ/mol and 199.5 kJ/mol, respectively. These values are comparable to other waste forms being developed for the same purpose.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decades, various types of wastes have been generated from nuclear power dismantling and dissecting power stations and reprocessing spent nuclear fuels (in which spent nuclear fuels are reused or recycled into next-generation reactor systems) [1,2]. Among these, lanthanides are directly generated from reprocessing and usually used in immobilization techniques and as surrogate materials for actinides [3,4]. The volume of lanthanide wastes obtained from reprocessing and pyroprocessing are relatively high [5]. Therefore, lanthanide waste forms have gained increasing attention [6–8].

B2O3-CaO-Al2O3 glass systems were developed to immobilize lanthanide oxides generated from pyroprocessing [9,10]. These waste forms are processable and durable and help maximize waste loading [9]. In particular, they exhibited good chemical durability when a standard leaching test was performed at 90 °C. However, thermal stability and crystallization behaviors of waste forms have rarely been studied. The ambient temperature in deep geological repositories under normal conditions, which does not exceed ~150 °C [11,12], is difficult to estimate during accidents [13]. Therefore, we investigated the crystal formation behaviors by applying additional heat treatment up to 900 °C [14].

Crystallization could occur when the glasses are exposed to high-temperature conditions. The impact of crystallization on glassy waste forms cannot be concluded as good or bad [15]. We attempted to crystallize glassy waste forms intentionally and fabricate glass-ceramic waste forms to enhance their mechanical properties [16] or partitioning effect [17]. Alternatively, once uncontrolled crystallization occurs, the properties of waste forms may deteriorate drastically [18]. Therefore, we need to consider how uncontrolled crystallization can occur relatively easily by calculating the activation energy for crystallization of the glass. Furthermore, additional bonds being formed during crystallization between radioactive nuclides (La) and the matrix former (B) can delay the release of target nuclides (from the glass phase) and help enhance safety and stability.

In this study, we attempted to fabricate the B2O3-CaO-Al2O3 glasses containing La2O3, determine the formation behaviors or morphological characteristics of crystalline phases by heat treatment at various temperatures, and assess the thermal stability and
3. Results and discussion

2. Experimental procedures

We fabricated a B$_2$O$_3$–CaO–Al$_2$O$_3$ glass system containing 0–15 mol% of La$_2$O$_3$ using nominal composition, as shown in Table 1. A glass batch of approximately 20 g was prepared by mixing commercial powders of reagent B$_2$O$_3$ (Sigma-Aldrich, 99.99%), CaO (Sigma-Aldrich, 99.9%), and Al$_2$O$_3$ (Sigma-Aldrich, 99.99%).

The raw materials contained in a platinum crucible were melted at 1300 °C for 30 min in an atmosphere electric furnace. The liquid was poured onto an iron plate and pressed quickly with another iron plate with a thickness of approximately 2 mm. The obtained glasses were labeled as La0, La6, La9, and La15 based on the content of La$_2$O$_3$. The maximum La$_2$O$_3$ composition of 15 mol % were determined as the composition without crystallization just after quenching under our glass melting condition.

The density (ρ, g/cm$^3$) for all specimens was measured using a density measuring kit (MS-DNY-52, Mettler Toledo) and the Archimedes method (with deionized water as the liquid medium) at room temperature. All measurements for each specimen were performed thrice and averaged. The molar volume (V$_m$, cm$^3$/mol) was calculated from the density and molar weight of the samples.

We continued to determine the crystallization kinetics only for the La15 specimens with the highest density. The crystallization temperature (T$_x$) was determined using a differential thermal analyzer (DTA, TA Q600, Pusan Center) for La15 with heating rates of 7, 10, 15, and 20 °C/min in the temperature range between 200 °C and 1000 °C in air flux.

We additionally heat-treated the La15 samples from 680 °C to 900 °C at intervals of 20 °C for 3 h. The specimens were ground and sieved, then all the powder size were used were less than 45 μm. X-ray diffraction patterns for each heat-treated specimen was recorded using Cu-Ka (λ = 0.154181 nm) radiation at 40 kV and 100 mA (for 2θ = 10°–80°). Each heat-treated specimen, we used a scanning electron microscope (SEM, Hitachi, SU70) to obtain the morphology of the formed crystalline phases. In addition, we used a transmission electron microscope (TEM, JEOL, JEM-2100F) to reveal the detailed morphological behavior of a crystallized specimen. They were operated at an accelerating voltage of 200 kV at the Daegu Center of the Korea Basic Science Institute (KBSI). Prior to analysis, the samples were sonicated for 2 h and dispersed in ethanol, and the solutions were dropped onto a porous carbon film on a copper grid. Next, the samples were air-dried, and energy dispersive spectroscopic analysis was subsequently performed.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Basic characteristics of different La$_2$O$_3$-containing glass systems

Table 1 lists the nominal compositions (wt%) of B$_2$O$_3$–CaO–Al$_2$O$_3$ glasses containing various concentrations of La$_2$O$_3$.

Table 1 Nominal compositions (wt%) of B$_2$O$_3$–CaO–Al$_2$O$_3$ glasses containing various concentrations of La$_2$O$_3$.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Composition</th>
<th>La0</th>
<th>La6</th>
<th>La9</th>
<th>La15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B$_2$O$_3$</td>
<td>56.2</td>
<td>52.9</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>47.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CaO</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>21.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al$_2$O$_3$</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La$_2$O$_3$</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We measured the density (ρ, g/cm$^3$) and molar volume (V$_m$, cm$^3$/mol) of these glasses. The values are listed in Table 2. As the content of La$_2$O$_3$ increases, ρ and V$_m$ increase. For the La15 specimen, 31% of ρ and 16% of V$_m$ rise sharply compared to La0. These results are natural because of the high density of La$_2$O$_3$ compared to the other chemicals. The increase in molar volume can be because the increase in molecular weight due to the addition of La$_2$O$_3$ is larger than the increase in density.

From the perspective of volume reduction, materials with higher density are more economically advantageous as wasteforms because they can occupy only smaller portion of expensive disposal room. Therefore, we selected the specimen with the highest density and continued to investigate its thermal and crystallization behaviors. Fig. 1 shows the DTA pattern measured with a 10 °C/min heating rate for La15. We determined the glass transition temperature (T$_g$) at 642 °C and crystallization temperature (T$_x$) at 824 °C. To obtain information about the crystallization behavior of the La$_2$O$_3$-containing B$_2$O$_3$–CaO–Al$_2$O$_3$ glass system, we selected the lowest heating temperature to be lower than the onset of the T$_x$.

3.2. Crystallization and structural behavior

Fig. 2 represents the X-ray diffraction patterns obtained from the heat-treated La15 at various temperatures. Based on these patterns, we could not find crystalline peaks up to 760 °C. From 780 °C, the peaks matched with lanthanum borate (LaBO$_3$, PDF#: 12–0762) crystal; orthorhombic structure, Pnam, cell parameter of 0.587 × 0.826 × 0.511 nm, and 90 × 90 × 90°C. In addition, at this temperature, the specimens started to lose their transparency and turned pale white. T$_x$ is the temperature at the maximum point of the exothermic peak obtained from the DTA [19] and not the starting point. Then, even at temperatures lower than the exact T$_x$,
that is on the onset of the $T_c$, crystallization can occur, as shown in Fig. 2. From 800 °C, an additional crystalline phase occurs: a lanthanum aluminum boron oxide crystal, LaAl2B4O13, PDF#: 87-0484, hexagonal, P-62m, cell parameter: 0.461 × 0.461 × 0.935 nm, 90 × 90 × 120 °C. The abundance of the second crystalline phase was less than 20% of the total crystalline phases according to the compared intensities between the highest peaks of the two phases. Therefore, we estimate the major crystalline phase as a LaBO3 crystal.

Fig. 3 shows the elemental distributions of a powdery specimen after heat treatment at 780 °C for 3 h. All the elements (Al, B, Ca, La, and O) existed in the powdery specimen. Al, Ca, and O were homogeneously distributed throughout the entire specimen, while some portions of B and La were concentrated in some parts of the powder. This concentration could be due to the formation of LaBO3 crystals inside the glassy phase. In addition, the formation of the crystal was confirmed again using the TEM data in Fig. 4. The crystalline phase was clearly distinguished from the amorphous glassy phase. The distance between the two planes of the crystals were 0.358 nm, which corresponds to the information of LaBO3 [20].

3.3. Morphologic behaviors

To investigate the morphology of the crystals, we measured SEM images of all heat-treated specimens (Fig. 5). The homogenous surface in the specimen heat-treated at 680 °C changed gradually, forming needlelike crystals at 700 °C. These shapes were matched that of the previously observed LaBO3 crystals [21]. As the
temperature increased to 780 °C, the size of the crystals increased and the proportion of glassy phases decreased. At 800 °C, the crystals were tabular and flaky. Surface roughness (along with the flaky characteristics) seems to be reinforced as the heat treatment was applied at higher temperatures between 800 °C and 900 °C, and more interlocking grain patterns were observed.

3.4. Thermal and kinetic analyses

The size of the particles (L, nm) in La15 was estimated from the full width at half maximum (FWHM) of the XRD peak using Scherrer’s equation [22]:

\[ L = \frac{0.9 \lambda}{B \cos \theta} \]  

where \( \lambda \) is the wavelength of the X-ray radiation (\( \lambda = 0.154 \) nm), \( B \) is the FWHM of the peak (radians) corrected for instrumental broadening, and \( \theta \) is the Bragg angle. We calculated the estimated average particle size of these glass-ceramic systems as 48 nm. According to Coble’s theory [23], the activation energy (\( E_g \)) of grain growth can be obtained by the Arrhenius equation [24]:

\[ \frac{d \ln k}{dT} = \frac{E_g}{RT^2} \]  

where \( k \) is the specific reaction rate constant, \( T \) is the absolute temperature, and \( R \) is the ideal gas constant. Jarcho et al. [25] revealed that the value of \( k \) was directly related to the grain size. By modifying and integrating Eq. (2), the following correlation is obtained:

\[ \log D = \left( - \frac{E_g}{2.303 R} \right)/T + A \]  

where \( D \) is the grain size and \( A \) is the intercept. We drew a plot of \( \log D \) versus the reciprocal of \( T \) and obtained a straight line, as shown in Fig. 6. The slope of the line represents the activation energy (\( E_g \)) of grain growth of the crystalline phase of LaBO3 in this glass, and the value was 12.6 kJ/mol.

To calculate the activation energy of crystallization (\( E_c \)) of the LaBO3 phase in La15, we measured the DTA spectra of the specimen at various heating rates (7 °C, 10 °C, 15 °C, and 20 °C), as shown in Fig. 7. \( T_x \) increased from 815 °C to 860 °C as the heating rate increased from 7 °C to 20 °C. This can be explained by the fact that at a slow heating rate, the glass state has sufficient time to transform into its crystalline phase. We applied the \( T_x \) values to the Kissinger’s or Redhead’s equation [26,27], as follows:

\[ \ln \left( \frac{\Phi}{T_x^2} \right) = - \frac{E_c}{RT} + \text{const.} \]  

where \( \Phi \) is the heating rate, \( T_x \) is the crystallization temperature or exothermic peak temperature, and \( R \) is the ideal gas constant. We obtained a straight line from the plot of \( \ln \left( \Phi/T_x^2 \right) \) vs. \( (1000/T_x) \), as shown in Fig. 8. By calculating the slope of the straight line, \( E_c \) was
obtained as 199.5 kJ/mol, which indicates the energy required for the phase transformation (from this glass phase to the LaBO₃ crystalline phase). According to the theory of crystallization kinetics [13,28], glasses have to overcome a certain potential barrier when the glasses transform into their crystalline state, and the height of the potential barrier is defined as Eₓ. Therefore, the larger the Eₓ, the higher the potential barrier that the glass needs to overcome for the transformation [13,28]. The value of La15 (199.5 kJ/mol) is similar to or slightly smaller than 200 kJ/mol values of other waste forms developed for the same purpose. We conclude that the waste forms are thermally stable (even at temperatures exceeding 900 °C).

**Data availability**

The raw data required to reproduce these findings are available to download from [https://dx.doi.org/10.17632/kn8p72k3db.1](https://dx.doi.org/10.17632/kn8p72k3db.1). The processed data required to reproduce these findings are available to download from [https://dx.doi.org/10.17632/kn8p72k3db.1](https://dx.doi.org/10.17632/kn8p72k3db.1).

**Declaration of competing interest**

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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**Appendix A. Supplementary data**

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at [https://doi.org/10.1016/j.net.2021.02.025](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.net.2021.02.025).

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[10] M. Kim, M.G. Ha, W. Um, H.C. Kim, K.S. Hong, Relationship between leaching behavior and glass structure of calcium-aluminoborate waste glasses with Al, Ca, and O were homogeneously distributed throughout the entire specimen, while a few portions of B and La were concentrated in some parts measured by transmission electron microscopy and energy dispersive spectroscopy. By differential thermal analysis at various heating rates, the activation energy of grain growth of the LaBO₃ crystalline phase in this glass was 12.6 kJ/mol and the activation energy of crystallization was 199.5 kJ/mol. These values are comparable to those of other waste forms developed for the same purpose.

**4. Conclusion**

The thermal stability and crystallization behaviors of La₂O₃ containing B₂O₃–CaO–Al₂O₃ glass waste forms were investigated. For La15, 31% of ρ and 16% of Vₐ rise sharply compared to the values of La0. The glass transition temperature (Tₓ) was 642 °C and the crystallization temperature (Tₜ) was 824 °C LaBO₃ phases were observed as major crystals from 780 °C by X-ray diffraction and exhibited needlelike structures by secondary electron microscopy.


