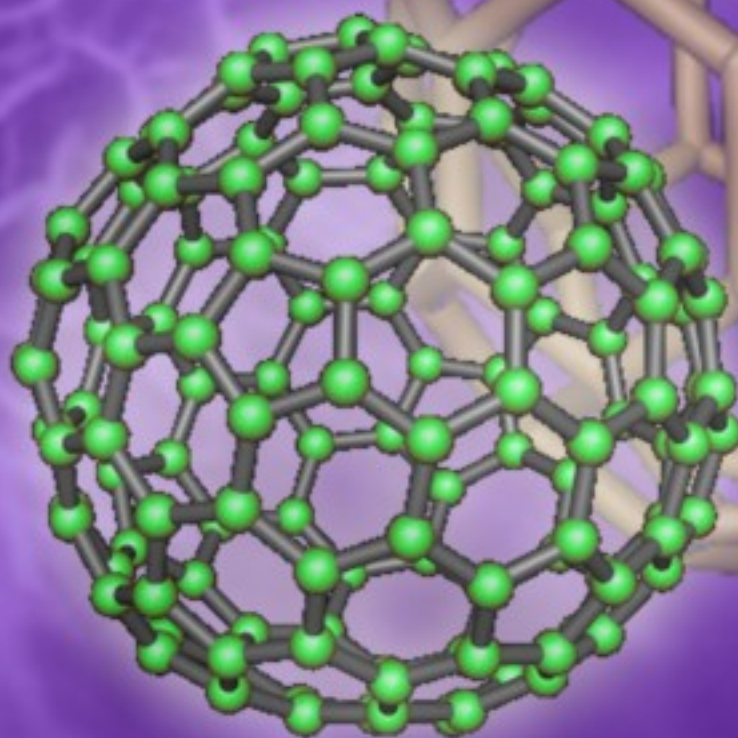
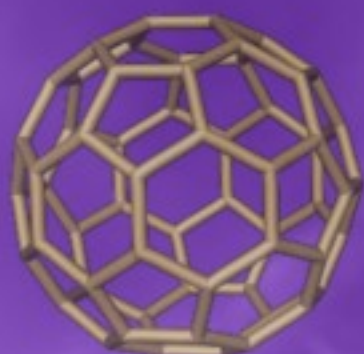


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Contents

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Research Articles

Sensors Based on Nanostructured Materials: Book Review <i>Sergey Y. YURISH</i>	1
Glucose Binding Protein as a Novel Optical Glucose Nanobiosensor <i>Majed DWEIK</i>	1
Hydrogen Sensor Based on Carbon Nano-tube Fortified by Palladium <i>A. Kazemzadeh, A. F. Hessari, M. Kashani, H. Azizi and N. Jafari</i>	9
Nanostructured ZrO₂ Thick Film Resistors as H₂-Gas Sensors Operable at Room Temperature <i>K. M. Garadkar, B. S. Shirke, Y. B. Patil and D. R. Patil</i>	17
Pull-in Phenomena and Dynamic Response of a Capacitive Nano-beam Switch <i>Farid Vakili-Tahami, Hamed Mobki, Ali-asghar keyvani-janbahan, Ghader Rezazadeh</i>	26
Palladium Surface Modification of Nanocrystalline Sol-Gel derived Zinc Oxide Thin Films and its Effect on Methane Sensing <i>P. Bhattacharyya, S. Maji, S. Biswas, A. Sengupta, T. Maji, H. Saha</i>	38
Gas Sensing Properties of Indium Tin Oxide Nanofibers <i>Shiyong Xu, Yong Shi</i>	47
Design, Modeling and Optimization of a Piezoelectric Pressure Sensor based on a Thin-Film PZT Membrane Containing Nanocrystalline Powders <i>Vahid Mohammadi, Mohammad Hossein Sheikhi</i>	56
Synthesis and Properties of Thin Film Nanocomposites Sn-Y-O for Gas Sensors <i>Stanislav Rembeza, Ekaterina Rembeza, Elena Russkih, Natalia Kosheleva</i>	71
Electroanalytical Nanoparticles Electrode based on NanoTiO₂/MWCNTs Mixture <i>Ganchimeg Perenlei, Wee Tee Tan</i>	78
Structural Properties of Nanosized NiFe₂O₄ for LPG Sensor <i>N. N. Gedam, A. V. Kadu, P. R. Padole, A. B. Bodade and G. N. Chaudhari</i>	86
Low-Cost Wireless Nanotube Composite Sensor for Damage Detection of Civil Infrastructure <i>Mohamed Saafi, Lanouar Kaabi</i>	96
Cross Linking Polymers (PVA & PEG) with TiO₂ Nanoparticles for Humidity Sensing <i>Monika Joshi and R. P. Singh</i>	105
Resolution Enhancement of Thermal and Optical Nanolithography Using an Organic Dry Developing Resist and an Optimized Tip <i>Salman Noach, Michael Manevich, Naftali P. Eisenberg and Eli Flaxer</i>	112

Wireless Sensor Network: Modeling and Analysis of MEMS based Nano-Nodes <i>Rohit Pathak, Satyadhar Joshi.....</i>	120
Respiration and Heartbeat Measurement for Sleep Monitoring using a Flexible AIN Piezoelectric Film Sensor <i>Nan Bu, Naohiro Ueno and Osamu Fukuda.....</i>	131
Design Optimization of Cantilever based MEMS Micro-accelerometer for High-g Applications <i>B. D. Pant, Shelley Goel, P. J. George and S. Ahmad</i>	143

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Nanostructured ZrO₂ Thick Film Resistors as H₂-Gas Sensors Operable at Room Temperature

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Abstract: Nanostructured ZrO₂ powder was synthesized by microwave assisted sol-gel method. The material was characterized by XRD and SEM techniques. X-Ray diffraction studies confirm that a combination of tetragonal and monoclinic zirconia nanoparticles is obtained by using microwave-assisted method. The nanopowder was calcined at an optimized temperature of 400 °C for 3 h. The prepared powder had crystalline size about 25 nm. Thick films of synthesized ZrO₂ powder were prepared by screen printing technique. The gas sensing performances of these films for various gases were tested. Films showed highest response to H₂ (50 ppm) gas at room temperature with poor responses to others (1000 ppm). The quick response and fast recovery are the main features of this sensor. The effects of microstructure, operating temperature and gas concentration on the gas response, selectivity, response time and recovery time of the sensor in the presence of H₂ gas and others were studied and discussed. *Copyright © 2009 IFSA.*

Keywords: Nanostructured ZrO₂, XRD, SEM, H₂ gas sensor, Gas sensitivity

1. Introduction

ZrO₂ have been widely used for various applications such as semiconductor in dye-sensitized solar cell, catalysts, fuel cells, resistors, gas sensors, transparent optical device, optical coating etc [1-3]. Conventional method for the preparation of the oxide is normally ceramic route, preparation through sol-gel route has many advantages, like good homogeneity, less number of process steps, easy for remote operation, low sintering temperature etc. In addition to that microwave-assisted synthesis is a

new route to produce inorganic compounds because microwave heating is in situ mode of energy conversion very attractive for chemist. Microwave device is able to produce rapid bulk heating due to strong thermal gradients induced by microwave heating, strong stirring occurs for liquid leading to thermal uniformity of forced hydrolysis and very fast heating rate [4-8].

Semiconducting oxides are widely used as inexpensive and robust sensors for toxic, hazardous and combustible gases and vapors in safety and automotive applications. Few semiconducting oxide materials used in these applications are ZnO, SnO₂, Fe₂O₃, Cr₂O₃, TiO₂ and ZrO₂ etc [9-20]. Energy is the driving force of all activities in the universe [21]. Nothing moves, changes, grows or decays without consumption of energy. It flows downhill from high-potential to low-potential and high-temperature source to cosmic cold of the outer space. For most organisms, energy required is derived from food. Unlike other organisms, human not only require food energy but also energy to drive machines, produce heat, generate electricity, transport, etc. The energy is obtained from fossil fuels, solar and nuclear resources [22-26]. Fossil fuels, coal and petroleum have limited age as their consumption is tremendous. These are nonrenewable resources. They cause explosive pollution. The extraction of energy from solar radiations causes a minimal damage to environment; but not developed well till today and unaffordable in social and domestic use. Nuclear energy has the serious problems with handling and waste disposal. It is, therefore, need to turn our attention towards the development of fuel economy based on hydrogen. Hydrogen is not the primary source of energy. It is an energy carrier. On combustion, it produces only water. Hence, the advantage of hydrogen is its virtually pollution-free combustion. It is therefore, destined to become the fuel of the future. Hydrogen as an energy carrier has widespread applications. It is explosively utilized in industrial fields as a fuel. It is a colorless and odorless gas, its leakage cannot be noticed easily. This gas is potentially hazardous because explosion accidents might be caused when they leak out by mistake. So there is a great demand and emerged challenges for monitoring for the purpose of control and safety applications in domestic and industrial fields [27].

The aim of the present work is to develop sensors by synthesizing nanostructured ZrO₂ material, which could detect the trace level of H₂ gas at room temperature.

2. Experimental

The ZrO₂ nanoparticles were synthesized by the hydrolysis of Zr(IV) salts in aqueous-alcohol solution. An initial aqueous-alcohol solution was prepared from distilled water and propylene glycol [8]. This solution was mixed with aqueous solution of zirconium oxychloride (ZrOCl₂.8H₂O) in ratio such that the zirconium concentration was 0.1M and the alcohol to water ratio was 1:1. The special arrangement was made to add dropwise aqueous ammonia (0.1ml / min.) with constant stirring till the pH of solution becomes 8. After complete precipitation, the hydroxide was washed with distilled water until chloride ions were not detected by AgNO₃ solution. Then the hydroxide in a glass beaker was placed in a micro-wave oven (in put power 600 W) about 15 minutes with on off cycle [5-6]. The dried precipitate was grinded by using agate pestle mortar and annealed in a muffle furnace at 400 °C for 3h. The Phase purity and the degree of crystallinity of the resulting ZrO₂ samples were monitored by XRD analysis.

Synthesized ZrO₂ powder was calcined at 300 °C for 30 min in air. Thick films of so obtained powder, were prepared by adopting the procedure explained elsewhere [13-19].

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Structural and Surface Morphology Analysis of ZrO₂ Nanoparticles

To determine the structure of nanoparticles the powder have been, firstly, analyzed by X-Ray diffraction. After annealing treatment at 200, 300, 400 and 500 °C, the XRD patterns after heat treatment at 300°C shows a slight increase of crystallinity as compared to the raw microwave powder and X-ray lines become thinner and thinner with increasing temperature due to strong growing of crystal size. The nanometric size of the particles leads to strong broadening of X-Ray diffracted lines and despite careful analysis of XRD patterns of raw powder, it is difficult to conclude about nature of the crystallographic phase produced. However, Bragg reflections intensities of tetragonal and monoclinic phase are observed after annealing treatment. Crystallinity of raw microwave powder was found to be poor compared to those obtained after annealing treatment [7].

Fig. 1 shows the XRD pattern of ZrO₂ nanoparticles within the 2θ range of 10 to 80°. XRD of ZrO₂ annealed at 400 °C for 3h in air exhibited its characteristic diffraction peaks of tetragonal and monoclinic. The determined characteristic 2θ values and hkl planes corresponding to monoclinic-ZrO₂ were at 35.39°(200), 63.08°(222) respectively (JCPDS 36-0420) while, the determined characteristic 2θ values and hkl planes corresponding to tetragonal-ZrO₂ were at 30.35°(111), 50.49°(220) and 60.40°(311), respectively (JCPDS 17-0923). The particle size of ZrO₂ powder was calculated by using Scherrer's relation, $t = 0.9\lambda / \beta \cos\theta$. Where, λ-wavelength of X-Ray in Å, β-full width at half maximum in radian. The average particle size of ZrO₂ nanoparticles is found to be 25 nm.

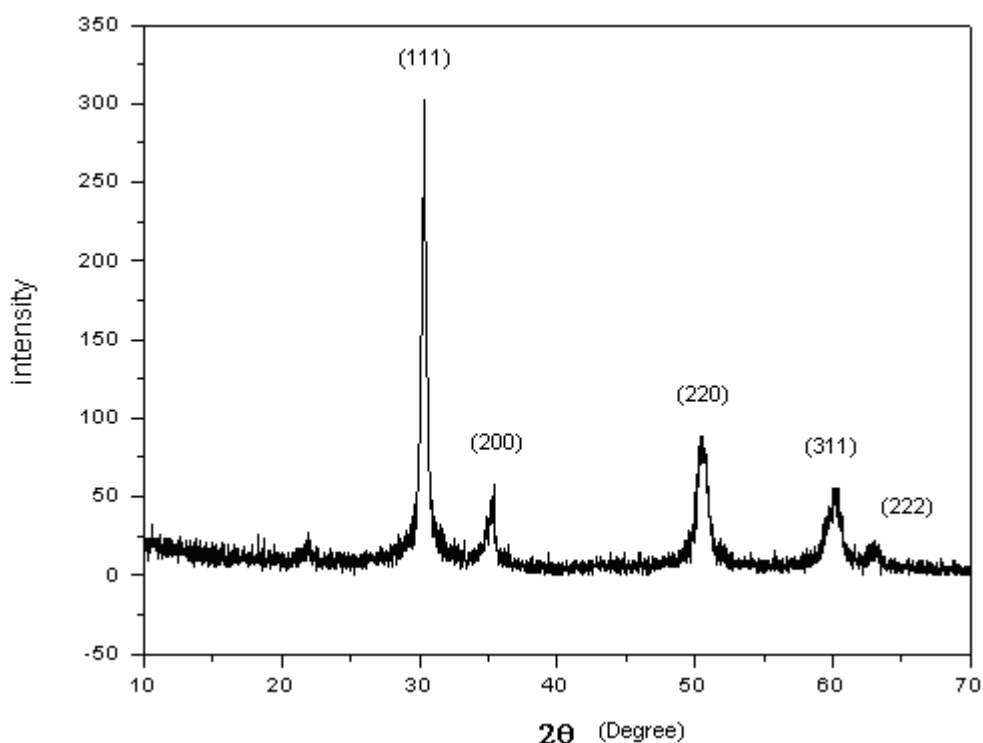


Fig. 1. XRD Pattern of ZrO₂ Nanoparticles Calcined at 400 °C, 3 h.

Fig. 2 shows the SEM photograph of ZrO₂ nanoparticles, from this figure it is seen that the grain size of the particle is found to be ~25 nm with uniform distribution. The value of particles size observed from SEM results were in good agreement with the XRD results. It reveals that the microwave

hydrolysis makes it possible to obtain particles of predominantly spherical shape with a narrow size distribution.

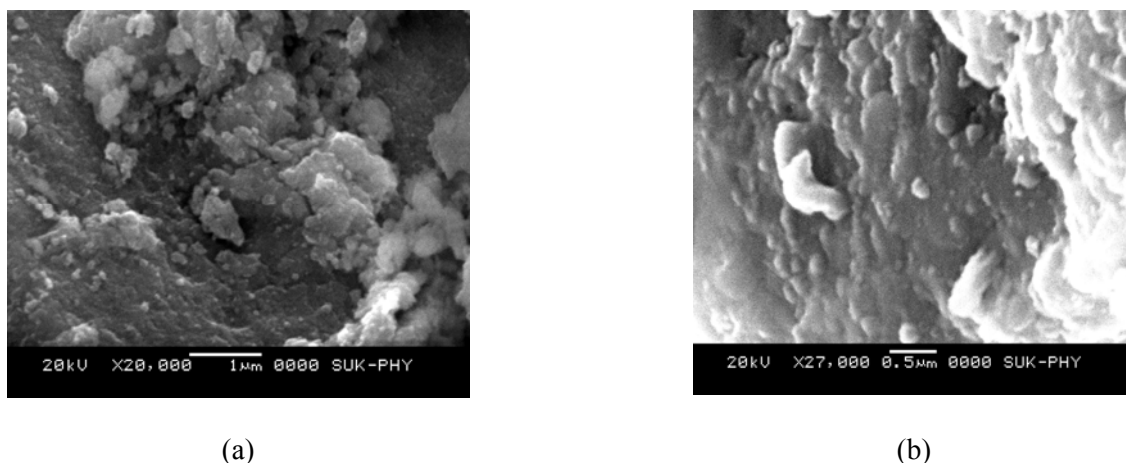


Fig. 2. SEM micrograph of ZrO₂ nanoparticles (a) Annealed at 300 °C, (b) Annealed at 400 °C.

3.2. Sensing Performance

3.2.1. Measurement of Gas Response, Selectivity, Response and Recovery Time

Gas response (S) is defined, as the ratio of change in conductance of the sensor on exposure of the target gas to the original conductance in air medium. The relation for S is:

$$S = (G_g - G_a) / G_a,$$

where G_a is the conductance of sensor in air medium;
 G_g is the conductance of sensor in gaseous medium.

Selectivity or specificity is defined, as the ability of a sensor to respond to certain gas in the presence of more gases. Selectivity factor (K) of one gas over other is defined as, the ratio of the maximum response of other gas to the maximum response of the target gas at optimum temperature.

$$\text{Selectivity factor } K = S_{\text{target gas}} / S_{\text{gas}}$$

The time taken for the sensor to attain 90 % of the maximum change in conductance on exposure to the target gas is the response time. The time taken by the sensor to get back 90 % of the original conductance is the recovery time.

3.2.2. Gas Selectivity

It is observed from Fig. 3 that the ZrO₂ thick films are sensitive to H₂ gas and it has relatively good selectivity against different gases. This is the main feature of pure ZrO₂ thick film sensor. It is also observed that, the ZrO₂ thick film sensor also responds to CO₂ gas, though less. The efforts are therefore must be taken to enhance the sensitivity and selectivity of the sensor to H₂ and CO₂ gases at different operating conditions. From above results, it leads to conclude that the material has a potential application to develop the H₂ and CO₂ as gas sensors.

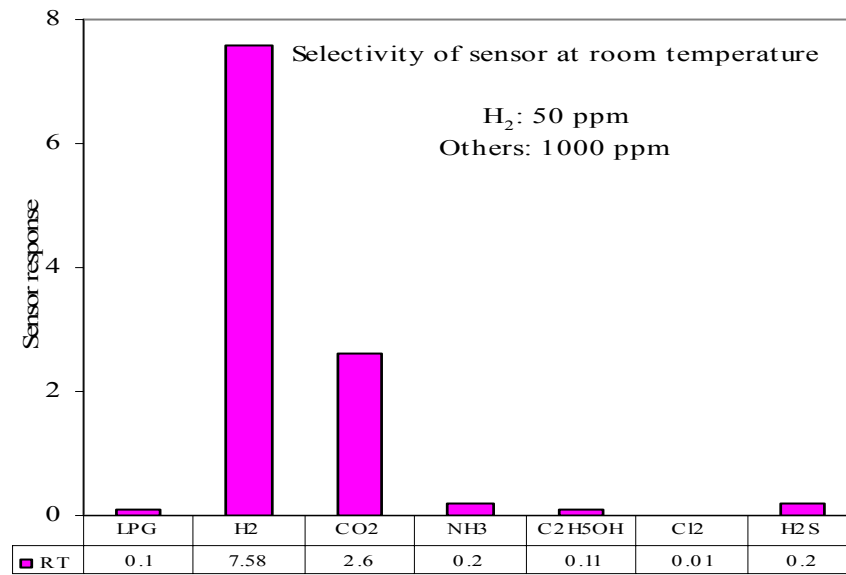


Fig. 3. Selectivity of pure ZrO₂.

Fig. 4 depicts the gas responses of ZrO₂ thick films to different gases (1000 ppm) with operating temperature. It is observed from figures that the gas responses increase with operating temperature, reach to their respective maxima and falls down further with increase in operating temperature. The highest response was observed at room temperature and gas response decreases with increasing temperature up to 150 °C. The film surface chemistry was favorable to sense the H₂ gas at room temperature. Beyond 150 °C, the response increases up to 300 °C and again falls down with increase in operating temperature. At 300 °C, the adsorbed oxygen species O⁻ react with exposed H₂ gas and oxidizes H₂ gas quickly. Beyond 300 °C, the adsorbed O⁻ species may desorbed or H₂ gas may oxidized before reaching the film surface. Hence, gas response may decrease further. At 300 °C, the gas response may be attributed to oxygen adsorption-desorption mechanism, but without treatment to the thick film the gas response is not attributed to adsorption-desorption mechanism.

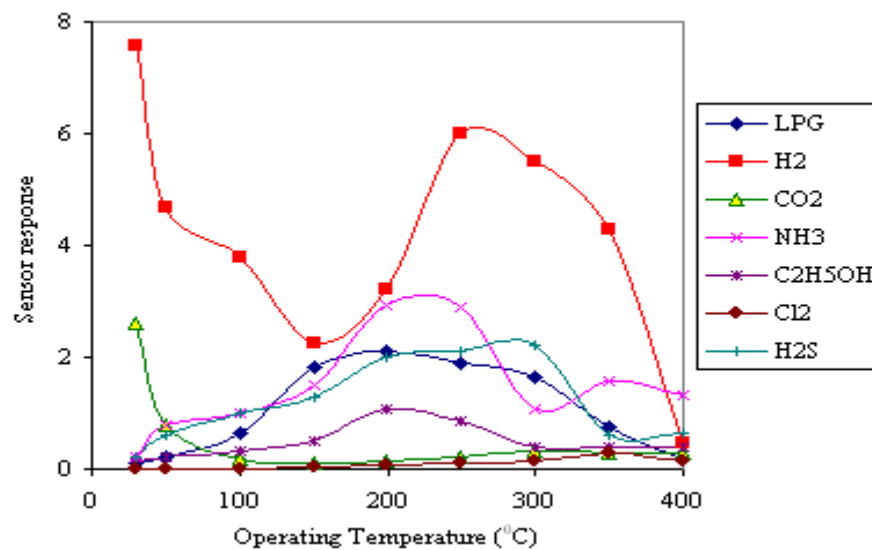


Fig. 4. Variation of gas responses for different gases.

3.2.3. Effect of Gas Concentration (Active Region)

The variation of sensor response of ZrO₂ thick film sample with H₂ gas concentration is represented in Fig. 5. It is clear from the figure that the gas response goes on increasing with gas concentration up to 50 ppm. The rate of increase in response was relatively large up to 50 ppm and saturated beyond 50 ppm. The monolayer of the gas molecules formed on the surface covers the whole surface of the film. The gas molecules from that layer would reach the surface active sites of the film. The excess gas molecules remain idle and would not reach the surface active sites of the sensor. Thus, the active region of the sensor would be up to 50 ppm.

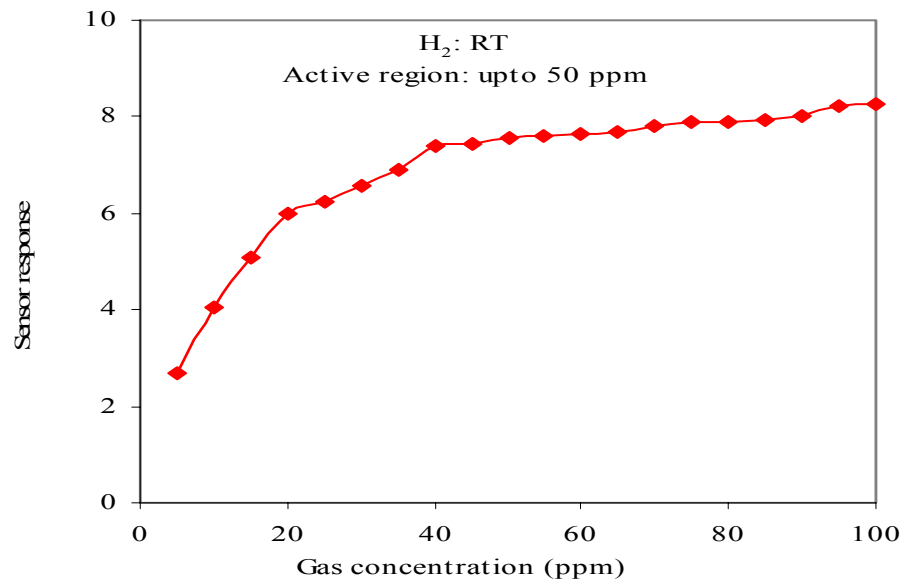


Fig. 5. Variation in sensor response with H₂ gas concentration.

3.2.4. Response and Recovery Time

The response of ZrO₂ thick film sensor was found to be quick (~ 3 s) to 50 ppm of H₂, while the recovery was fast (~ 30 s) (Fig. 6). The fast response may be attributed to faster oxidation of the gas. The negligible quantity of the surface reaction product and its high volatility explains its fast response and quick recovery to its initial chemical status.

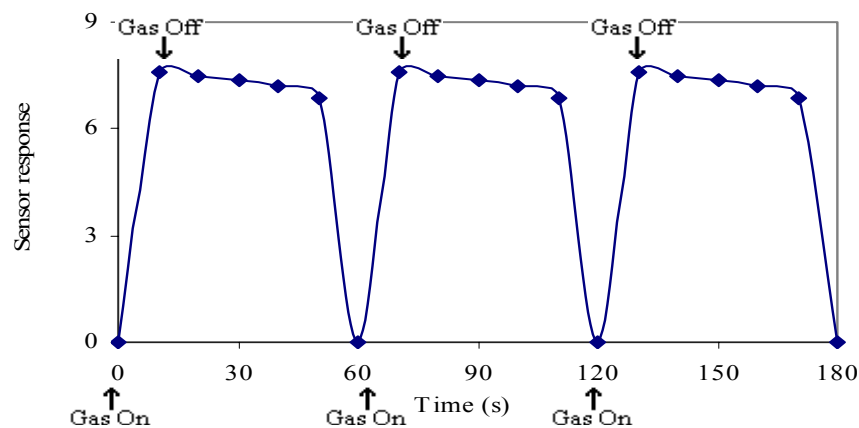
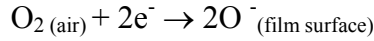


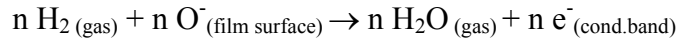
Fig. 6. Response and Recovery Time.

3.2.5. Response at 300 °C (Oxygen Adsorption-desorption Mechanism)

At higher temperature, the atmospheric oxygen O₂ adsorbs on the surface of the thick film. It captures the electrons (Fig. 7) from conduction band as:



It would result in decreasing conductivity of the film. When hydrogen on exposure reacts with oxygen, the following reaction takes place, ultimately converting the hydrogen to water molecules in vapors form as:



This shows the n-type conduction mechanism. For complete combustion, 1 mol of hydrogen will require the same amount of oxygen and will produce same number of water molecules. The entire surface of the sensor material is covered with chemisorbed oxygen ions O₂, O₂⁻, O⁻ and O²⁻ depending on temperature. The adsorbed O⁻ species create space-charge region near the film surface at high temperature by extracting the electrons from the material. Hydrogen being a reducing gas, reacts with adsorbed O⁻ species on the surface and re-injects the electrons back to the material, thereby increasing the conductance of the film.

The fast response may be due to the fast oxidation of H₂ into H₂O. After evaporating water molecules from the film surface, the film recovers to its original chemical state.

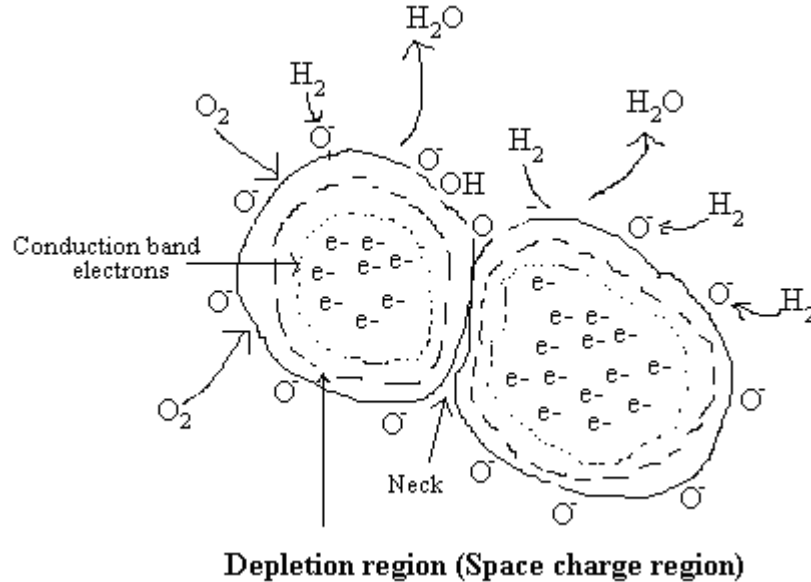


Fig. 7. Sensing Mechanism on the surface of the film.

3.2.6. Response at Room Temperature

The ZrO₂ thick films cause the formation of intergrain boundaries of ZrO₂-ZrO₂ grains. The exposed H₂ gas molecule captures the lattice oxygen from the surface of the film at room temperature. This would result the oxygen deficiency in the bulk of the material preferably at the surface. The semiconductivity in ZrO₂ may be due to large oxygen deficiency. The increase in the conductivity of

ZrO₂ thick films could be attributed to the charge-carrier generation mechanism resulted from the electronic defects due to nanostructured size of the grains. These generated electrons and the donor level in the energy band gap of ZrO₂ will contribute to increase in conductivity. This results in increasing the conductance of the film at room temperature.

4. Conclusions

The ZrO₂ nanoparticles were prepared by simple microwave assisted method. The well spherical size, narrow distribution and 25 nm size particles were obtained by this method. It is very simple, time as well as energy saving technique. The XRD pattern shows the ZrO₂ nanoparticles exists in both the phases of tetragonal and monoclinic. The ZrO₂ nanoparticles in the thick film form prepared by screen printing technique showed better response to H₂ gas at room temperature even at low concentration of H₂ gas (50 ppm).

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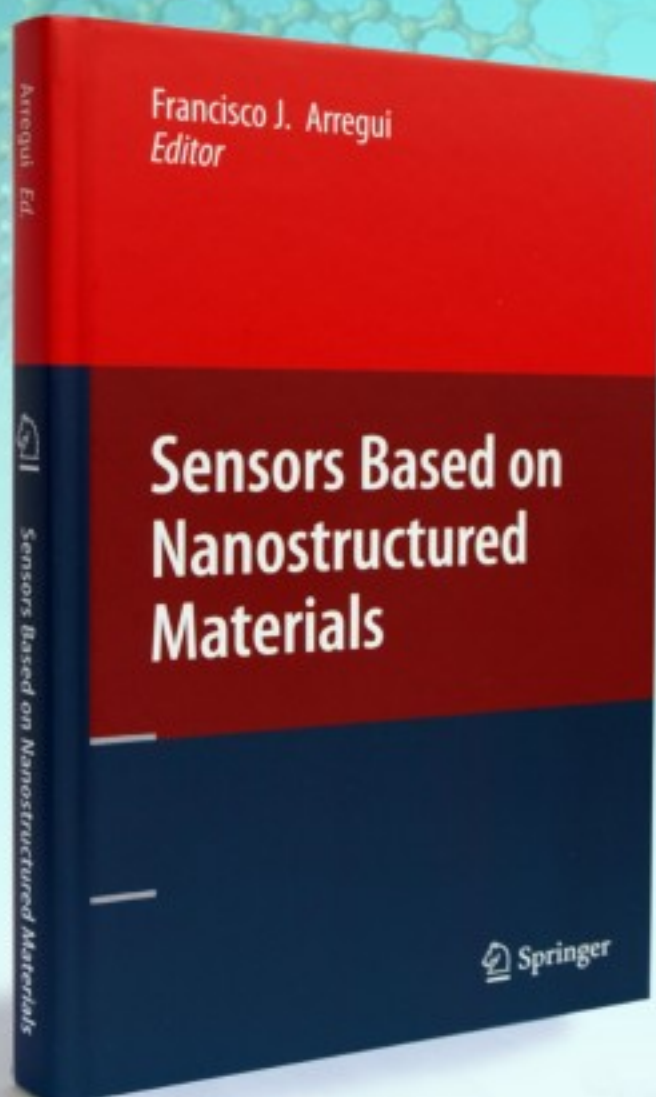
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