The production of LiCoO₂ cathode thick films for an all-solid-state microbattery

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Crack-free LiCoO₂ films with a thickness more than 10 μm have been prepared by a sol-gel derived screen-printing process, using two different-sized LiCoO₂ powders (mean particle sizes: 6 μm and 0.8 μm). The slurry as a coating medium consists of LiCoO₂ powders and a LiCoO₂ sol-gel precursor solution, which gives a well-dispersed slurry with high powder content. The slurry is screen-printed onto a Pt-coated alumina and annealed at relatively low temperatures as in a conventional sol-gel process. The feasibility of applying the fabricated films as cathodes for lithium rechargeable batteries is demonstrated. No obvious cracking after cycling was observed. Excellent cyclability was obtained. The films prepared using fine grain powders are less porous than those made from large grain powders, which lead to a better Coulombic efficiency for electrodes using the former. It is suggested that the novel process is promising for fabricating LiCoO₂ thick films for potential applications in all-solid-state rechargeable lithium batteries.

Key words: LiCoO₂, Thick films, Screen printing, All-solid-state rechargeable lithium microbatteries.

Introduction

Recently, considerable attention has been paid to the preparation of all-solid-state lithium-ion microbatteries as micro-power sources for microsystems such as microsensors and microelectronics.

Several transition metal oxides have been extensively studied as high-voltage cathode materials for rechargeable microbatteries. Among them, LiCoO₂ has been widely used as the cathode material due to the advantages of having a high specific capacity and long lifetime. LiCoO₂ thin films have been prepared by various techniques such as RF sputtering [1-12], pulsed laser deposition [13, 14], and a sol-gel method [15-18]. The sol-gel method is an attractive thin-film synthesis process since it has many advantages such as easy and low cost preparation, good control of stoichiometry, and a high deposition rate. Nevertheless, it is known that the sol-gel method is not suitable for the preparation of thick films. In order to obtain crack-free thick films, multiple coating processes are necessary. Considering that the capacity of microbatteries is related to the thickness of the cathode film, cathode thick films should be prepared using a simple, efficient process. Recently, it has been reported that thick LiCoO₂ cathode films were able to be prepared by a screen printing method, in which fine LiCoO₂ crystalline particles were dispersed in a sol-gel precursor solution to form a uniform slurry, and the slurry was screen printed onto a substrate, followed by annealing at relatively low temperatures as in the conventional sol-gel process [19]. As a result, the procedure for attaining the required thickness will be simplified compared to the conventional sol-gel process.

The present study focuses on the effect of the LiCoO₂ particle size on the electrochemical characteristics of thick LiCoO₂ cathode films prepared by this screen printing technique.

Experimental

Preparation of thick films by screen printing

A slurry was made by mixing the LiCoO₂-producing sol with a LiCoO₂ powder using a ball mill machine (pulverisette-7, Fritsch). To determine the weight ratio of the powder to precursor sol, the powder content is defined as follows:

\[ \text{Powder content (wt %)} = \frac{P}{P+S} \]

where \( P \) is the weight of the LiCoO₂ powders added and \( S \) the remaining LiCoO₂ in the precursor sol after annealing. A powder content of 90% was used in this work. For the LiCoO₂ precursor solution, lithium acetylacetonate (LiCH₃Co-CHCoCH₃) and cobalt acetate-tetrahydrate (Co(CH₃CO₂)₂·4H₂O) in the ratio Li/Co of 1:1 were used as solutes, and a mixture of 2-methoxyethanol and acetic acid as a solvent.

Two different-sized powders (Fig. 1) were used; powders made by classical solid-state synthesis (mean
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diameter 6 μm) and powders with a small grain size (~0.8 μm) prepared by a sol approach. The slurries thus prepared were screen printed onto platinum-coated alumina substrates. For some cases, prior to thick film deposition from a slurry, a thin film was spin-coated from a xerogel precursor solution on to the substrate as a buffer layer. The deposited thick films were pre-heated at 150 and 380 °C for 1h and then at 750 °C for 1h.

Characterization of the films

The microstructure and the thickness of the films were observed by a field emission scanning electron microscopy (FE-SEM). The electrochemical properties of the films as a cathode for Li-ion batteries were evaluated using a glass beaker-type cell. The cell consisted of a lithium metal foil as a counter electrode and a LiCoO₂ film as a working electrode. The electrolyte was 1M LiPF₆ in a mixture of ethylene carbonate (EC) and diethyl carbonate (DEC) (1:1 by volume, provided by Cheil Industries Inc. South Korea). The cells were galvanostatically charged and discharged at 100 μA/cm². All experiments, including cell assembly and electrochemical tests, were carried out in an Ar-filled glove box.

Results and Discussion

Figure 2 shows SEM photographs of the surface and the cross-sectional view of the thick films derived from the slurry using the different-sized powders. A thickness greater than 10 μm was easily achievable and thick, crack-free LiCoO₂ films were prepared. At this point, it is meaningful to note that thick LiCoO₂ coatings using a standard sol-gel technique are achieved by depositing multiple coats, and it is difficult then to make crack-free films thicker than 10 μm [15].

From the SEM micrographs, it could be also seen that film prepared from fine grain powders was less porous than those formed from by larger grain powders.

Figure 3 shows the capacity of the LiCoO₂ films as a function of cycle number, cycled between 3.0 and 4.25 V. The capacity increases with the film thickness and a stable cycleability is maintained. One can see that the film electrodes formed from large grain powder shows a relatively large irreversible capacity loss during the first cycle, corresponding to a Coulombic efficiency of ~75% and the Coulombic efficiency gradually increases to ~85%. However, in the case of the film prepared using fine grain powder, a good Coulombic efficiency of ~85% was obtained in the first cycle and above 90% for subsequent cycles. The corresponding Coulombic efficiency of these samples is compared as a function of cycle number in Fig. 4. It is believed that the Coulombic efficiency during cycling could be related to the contact resistance between the LiCoO₂ film and the current collector on the substrate, and/or the defects in the film electrode such as porosity. From the present results, it seems that a slurry prepared using fine powders leads to a less porous film and an improved contact between the film and the current collector.

In order to enhance the contact, a LiCoO₂ thin film was deposited on the substrate as a buffer layer by a sol-gel spin-coating method before the thick film deposition by screen printing. Using this approach, the Columbic efficiency of the film derived from the larger grain powder (6 μm) was improved as shown in Fig. 5. On the other hand, in the case of the film prepared using the fine grain powder (0.8 μm), the effect of the buffer layer on the Coulombic efficiency appeared to be small compared to that of the film with the larger
grain powders (data not shown here).

Figure 6 shows an SEM image of a LiCoO$_2$ thick film (described in Fig. 1(a)) after 55 cycles. The surface of the film electrode after cycling is devoid of any cracks and the morphology of the film appears to be unchanged from that before cycling. One might expect that cracking in the cathode film structure and during cycling would lead to a short-circuit of all-solid-state cells fabricated with such cathodes [2] and would have a deleterious effect on the interface stability between the cathode and the solid electrolyte films. Therefore, the present results, although preliminary in nature as obtained from the half-cell using a liquid electrolyte, are reflective of the potential of a thick LiCoO$_2$ film prepared by a combined process of a sol-gel method and screen-printing as cathodes electrodes for all-solid-
state rechargeable batteries.

Further investigation is ongoing to improve the micro-
structure of the films through controlling the content,
size and dispersion of powders in the slurry, and the
viscosity of the slurry. Hopefully this will further
improve the electrochemical properties of the films for
all-solid-state rechargeable lithium batteries.

Conclusions

Crack-free LiCoO2 thick films have been prepared by
a screen-printing technique using a slurry consisting of
fine LiCoO2 powders and a LiCoO2 sol-gel precursor
solution. The fine particles and the sol-gel medium are
bonded together during post-annealing at relatively low
temperatures compared with the conventional sol-gel
process. The thick films prepared using fine grain
powders are less porous than those prepared from
larger grain size powders. This seems to lead to better
electrochemical properties as cathode electrodes for all-
solid-state lithium rechargeable microbatteries. No
obvious cracking during film fabrication and cycling
was observed.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Korean Ministry of
Science and Technology through the research program
for “National Research Laboratory”, and also supported,
in part, by LG Chemical Ltd.

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