Infrared fluorescence and optical gain characteristics of chalcogenide-bound erbium cluster-fluoropolymer nanocomposites

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The infrared fluorescence and optical gain characteristics of optically transparent nanocomposites
consisting of (THF)3Er10Se6I12 (“Er10”) or (DME)2Er(SC6F5)3 (“Er1”) clusters dissolved in a
transparent hexafluoroisopropyl (6f) variant of a perfluorocyclobutyl (PFCB)-based fluoropolymer
are reported. Under excitation at 980 nm, fluorescence was observed at 1540 nm from both Er10 and
Er1 with a 3dB bandwidth of 96 and 60 nm, respectively. The maximum gain computed for Er10
and Er1 was 2.8 and 0.021 dB/cm, respectively. The corresponding threshold pump powers for
Er10 and Er1 were calculated to be 1.7 and 0.2 mW, respectively. These computations are consistent
with gain characteristics measured by the amplified spontaneous emission technique and suggest
that these nanocomposites are promising materials for active optical devices. © 2006 American
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Lanthanide-based materials are found in a wide range of devices including displays, lasers, optical amplifiers, and tag-
gants because of their attractive luminescent properties. To
effect high emission, traditional low phonon (vibrational) en-
ergy inorganic materials (e.g., halides or chalcogenides) are
processed as single crystals and glasses in fiber, film, and
monolithic form. However, these materials are generally dif-
cult to process, possess poor mechanical properties, require
expensive processing methods, and exhibit low chemical and
thermal stability. Polymer-based materials offer the oppor-
tunity to replace traditional inorganic materials since they have
attractive mechanical properties, high chemical durability,
good thermal stability, and can easily be processed with well-
established cost-effective methods to derive the desired
forms. The incorporation of molecular lanthanide
compounds into polymers include systems such asNd(HFA-D)3,
in poly(methylmethacrylate) (PMMA),1 neodymium octa-
tanoate [Nd(OCA)3] in PMMA,2,3 Nd tetrakis (benzoyl trifluorooacetate) in various matrices,4 Er(DBM)phen in
PMMA,5,6 Er poly (perfluorobutenylyflether) in
(PF-plastic),7 Er tetakis (benzoyltrifluorooacetate) in vari-
ous organic hosts,4 Eu(TFAA)3 in PMMA,8 Eu(DBM)3 in
PMMA,9 Yb–Er co-doped pentanedione in epoxy novolak
resin,10 Nd-doped polyimide,11 and Nd chelates in various
organic hosts.12,13 The optical properties of plastic optical fibers containing these lanthanide complexes,14 fail to exhibit
promising emission characteristics. Erbium organometallics
typically exhibit lifetimes for the 4I_{13/2} excited state in the μs
regime, resulting in low radiative quantum efficiency on the
order of 0.01–0.1%.15–19 These low quantum efficiencies are
attributed to the presence of high frequency vibrational
bands, such as C–H, O–H, or N–H bonded to Er3+, that
reduce emission lifetimes by multiphonon relaxation.

Our approach to obviating these difficulties has been to
utilize rare-earth-containing low-vibrational energy materials
(e.g., halides and chalcogenides). For example, we have re-
ported on a variety of lanthanide-doped halide, chalcogenide,
and chalc-halide nanoparticles and molecular clusters that
exhibit excellent fluorescence characteristics.20–24
LaF3 and LaCl3 nanoparticles doped with Pr3+ or Dy3+
that exhibit quantum efficiencies in excess of 70%
at 1.3 μm,22 have been synthesized. More recently,
(THF)3Er10Se6I12 (Er10)20 and (DME)2Er(SC6F5)3 (Er1)21
were reported with quantum efficiencies of 78 and 75%, re-
spectively, at 1.5 μm. To our knowledge, these latter mate-
rials are the first and only Er-based molecular compounds
that have millisecond decay times and radiative quantum ef-
ciciencies comparable to inorganic compounds. These excep-
tional characteristics are attributed to the unique structure of
these cluster compounds, where Er-chalcogenide clusters are
encapsulated by a shroud of organic ligands. Solubility in
organic solvents and polymeric hosts results from the organic
ligand encapsulation, which also minimizes light scattering
to effect high optical transparency. Such scattering is far
more problematic for nanocomposites based on nanoparticles
because of the difficulty in dispersing nanoparticles below
the length scale of 100 nm while maintaining a high volume

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percentage of solids. Initial reports on the optical performance of such active nanoparticle polymer waveguides have been reported.\(^23,24\) These nanocomposites offer tremendous opportunities because of their unique wavelengths, bright emissions, and controlled line shape.

In this work, we report the infrared emission and optical gain characteristics of Er10 and Er1 dissolved into a transparent hexafluoroisopropyl (6F, \([-\text{C}_3\text{H}_7\text{F}_3\text{O}_2\text{F}_3\text{I}_n\text{]}\)) variant of perfluorocyclobutyl (PFCB)-based fluoropolymers. The PFCB polymer was selected as the host because of its low attenuation in the infrared region relative to the well-known PMMA system. The synthesis and optical properties of 6F polymer have been reported previously.\(^25–27\)

\((\text{THF})_x\text{Er}_{10}\text{Se}_6\text{I}_6/6F\) and \((\text{DME})_x\text{Er}(\text{SC}_6\text{F}_5)_3/6F\) were prepared according to previously reported procedures.\(^20,21\) Precursor solutions for composite materials were prepared by dissolving different concentrations of erbium compounds in the PFCB matrix (available through Tetramer Technologies, L.L.C., Pendleton, SC). The 6F polymer was dissolved in neat toluene to give a solution concentration of 0.1 g/mL and the Er compounds were added to 1 mL of the polymeric solution over a wide range of concentrations (Er1: 0.025 mmol = 0.024 g, 0.05 mmol = 0.048 g, 0.1 mmol = 0.096 g, 0.2 mmol = 0.192 g, and 0.4 mmol = 0.384 g). Composite films were prepared by casting droplets of suspension with a pipette onto glass slides. The droplets spread under the influence of gravity while the toluene solvent evaporated to form a homogeneous transparent composite film.

Optical absorption measurements of the films were measured using a Perkin–Elmer Lambda 9 double beam spectrophotometer (Perkin Elmer, Wellesley, MA). Emission spectra were recorded by exciting the sample with a 980 nm laser diode in the 90°-excitation geometry (S-980, Coherent, Santa Clara, CA). The emission from the sample was focused onto a 1 m Triax 550 monochromator (Jobin Yvon, Edison, NJ) and detected by a thermoelectrically cooled InGaAs detector. The signal was intensified with a SR 850 DSP lock-in amplifier (Stanford Research System, Sunnyvale, CA) and processed with a computer controlled by the Spectramax software (GRAMS 32, Galactic Corp., Salem, NH).

The optical gain coefficient of powdered samples was measured by the amplified spontaneous emission (ASE) technique in the L-L/2 configuration.\(^28\) For the ASE technique, the emission intensity from different lengths of the pumped region of the sample are compared. Commonly, the comparison is made from two discrete values, which are namely the full length and the half length of the sample (L-L/2 method).\(^28\) It is done by masking the sample surface (or equivalently the pumping beam) with a shutter.

Optical absorption spectra of the Er10/6F and Er1/6F composite films obtained in the visible region with absorption band assignments are shown in Fig. 1. The absorption spectrum shows the typical Er\(^{3+}\) absorption transitions, which are comparable in intensity and shape with those of Er10 and Er1 single crystals reported previously.\(^21\) A comparison of the emission spectrum at 1540 nm for two nanocomposite films is shown in Fig. 2. The \(4I_{15/2} \rightarrow 4I_{13/2}\) emission exhibits a peak due to fluorescence at 1540 nm with a bandwidth (full width at half maximum) of 96 nm and 60 nm for Er10 and Er1, respectively. This broad spectrum may permit a wide gain bandwidth over which optical amplification could occur, which is useful for dense wavelength division multiplexing. With the computed radiative decay time\(^20\) and measured spectral bandwidth, the stimulated emission cross-section of the 1540 nm band was estimated to be 0.86 \(\times\) \(10^{-20}\) cm\(^2\)(Er10/6F) and 1.4 \(\times\) \(10^{-20}\) cm\(^2\)(Er1/6F). The reported values of stimulated emission cross-section of Er\(^{3+}\) in other doped polymers were in the range of 3.5 \(\times\) \(10^{-20}\) to 5.8 \(\times\) \(10^{-20}\) cm\(^2\). Using the measured optical parameters for the Er complexes, an estimate can be made for the optical gain and threshold pump power for a waveguide amplifier. Our numerical simulation utilized a planar waveguide configuration with a core dimension of 2 \(\times\) 1 \(\mu\)m\(^2\) for either Er10/6F or Er1/6F nanocomposites.

The optical gain was estimated using the following approach. Rate equations were reduced to those of a quasi-two-level system assuming that the population of the \(4I_{11/2}\) state decayed rapidly to the \(4I_{13/2}\) state.\(^29\) The steady-state solutions of the rate equations yielded the populations of the \(4I_{13/2}\) excited state \(N_a\) and the ground state \(4I_{15/2}\) \((N_g)\). \(N_a\) and \(N_g\) are given as follows: \(N_a = R_a/W_a + R_p\) and \(N_g = W_a/W_p + R_p\), where \(R_p = \sigma P h c /\lambda\) is the Er\(^{3+}\) excitation rate, \(W_a = (\tau_a)^{-1}\) the Er\(^{3+}\) decay rate, \(P\) is the pump power in the waveguide, \(\sigma_a\) is the absorption cross-section at the pumping wavelength (980 nm), \(\lambda\) is the excitation wavelength, and \(a\) is the waveguide cross-section. The optical
emission cross section, and
films.

$G = \frac{1}{I_0} \frac{dI}{dt}$

transmitted intensity is given by the absorption of the band aromatic ligand in the polydentate cage. However, in this case the pumping is done at 1.4 mW reported for an Er-

0.021 dB/cm, respectively, with a corresponding threshold power of 1.7 and 0.2 mW. The predicted optical gain was estimated from the expression

$G = \frac{1}{I_0} \frac{dI}{dt}$

The maximum gain obtained for Er10 and Er1 are shown in Fig. 3 and were calculated using $\alpha = 0.4$ and a film cross-section of 2 $\times 1 \mu m^2$.

The maximum gain obtained for Er10 and Er1 is 2.8 and

0.021 dB/cm, respectively, with a corresponding threshold pump power of 1.7 and 0.2 mW. The predicted optical gain coefficients agree with the measured values of 2.5 dB/cm and 0.02 dB/cm obtained independently from ASE measurements. These threshold values are many times smaller than other reported Er-based organic complexes, which are on the order of 900 mW due to the very low fluorescence decay time of the 1550 nm band. It should be noted that this threshold power is comparable to the 1.4 mW reported for an Er-polydentate cage. However, in this case the pumping is done through the absorption of the band aromatic ligand in the molecule at 287 nm. This mechanism of energy transfer facilitates a low pump threshold because of the high absorbance of this band. Low threshold power corresponding to 1.5 mW has also been reported for inorganic systems, such as Er-doped silicates or Al2O3 waveguides. The approximate 100-fold reduction in optical gain in Er1/6F relative to Er10/6F is due in part to the 10-fold reduction in Er concentration for Er1. Other factors, such as energy transfer, upconversion, and scattering, could play a role in creating the sig-

ificant differences in gain observed between these two molecules.

In conclusion, chalcogen-bound Er clusters dissolved in fluoropolymer composite materials emit strongly at 1544 nm. Coordination of organic substituents to the Er gives organosolubility in fluoropolymers to effect excellent transmission. These nanocomposites have emission and optical gain comparable to conventional inorganic systems.

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$G = \frac{1}{I_0} \frac{dI}{dt}$

FIG. 3. Optical gain as a function of the pump power in (a) (THF)Er3S6Se12I6 /6F and (b) (DME)2Er(SCF3)3/6F nanocomposite films.