Measurement of the Thermal Diffusivity of Materials by Diverging Thermal Wave Technique

Mohd Maarof Moksin, W. Mahmood Mat Yunus and Zainal Abidin Talib

Department of Physics
Faculty of Science and Environmental Studies
Universiti Pertanian Malaysia,
43400 UPM, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The applications of diverging thermal wave technique to measure thermal diffusivities of materials are reported. In essence, the technique makes use of the information content of the thermal waves observed by means of a wide band infrared detector, that laterally displaced from the heat source, following pulsed laser excitation of the materials. Some observations obtained from aluminium, lead, graphite foil, and zirconium graphite samples are presented.

Keywords: thermal wave, thermal diffusivity, diverging, excitation

INTRODUCTION

Thermal wave techniques are increasingly being used to study thermo-physical properties of materials (e.g. Enguehard et al. 1990; Imhof et al. 1991; Moksin 1993). In this technique, the heat deposited by the laser pulse diffuses to cooler regions of the sample, at rates determined by its thermal diffusivity. Optical properties also play a part in determining the initial temperature gradient within the sample and the way the heated spots emit thermal infrared radiation. Therefore, the thermal waves as detected by the change in the emitted grey body radiation subsequent to pulse laser illumination can be analysed to study the surface and subsurface properties of the materials.

In this paper, the discussion is restricted to thermal waves in which the source of heat and the point of detection are spatially separated, i.e. the thermal waves diverge radially from their source before they can be detected, in contrast to the converging technique described by Enguehard et al. (1990).
The former can be used to characterize materials for their radial anisotropies, while the latter has the advantage for detecting weak signals.

**EXPERIMENTAL TECHNIQUE**

Previous work on diverging thermal wave technique was reported by Luukkala et al. (1982). They used a line-focused cw-modulated laser for excitation. The phase of the thermal waves was then detected by an infrared detector with horn attached to limit its angle of view. In the present work, thermal waves were generated by using a tightly focused pulsed laser. They were detected at several distances from the laser spot by using a focused wideband infrared detector.

*Fig. 1* shows a schematic diagram of the apparatus. A 266 nm pulsed laser was used for excitation to illuminate an area of diameter \( \sim 20\mu m \). The CdHgTe infrared detector and the sample remain fixed, while the laser spot was line-scanned at regular steps away from detection point. A distance of typically \( \sim 100 - 150\mu m \) was required before the thermal waves were clearly resolved from the direct opto-thermal decay signal. The strong attenuation makes it increasingly difficult to detect the thermal waves as the displacement is increased. Measurements were taken from homogeneous samples (aluminium and lead) and refractory materials (zirconium graphite and graphite foil).

![Schematic diagram of the apparatus](image-url)

*Fig. 1. Schematic diagram of the apparatus*

A simple model for such thermal waves can be constructed by considering a thermal wave, generated at a point within an infinite isotropic medium,
whose subsequent spread is described by radial diffusion equation, for which an approximate solution is given by Carslaw and Jaeger (1959) and Imhof et al. (1991) as

\[
\theta(r,t) = \left[ \theta_0 \exp \left( -\frac{r^2}{4Dt} \right) \right] / \left( 4\pi Dt \right)^{3/2}
\]

where \( r \) is the radius, \( \theta_0 \) is the initial temperature jump at \( r = 0 \), and \( D \) is the thermal diffusivity. This point source can be replaced at the surface of a semi-infinite isotropic medium without changing the form of the solution by invoking a mirror symmetry argument and noting that there are no thermal gradients and therefore no heat flow across this surface. An expression for the thermal diffusivity can then be obtained by setting the derivative \( \partial \theta / \partial t \) to zero, i.e. \( D = r^2 / (6t_o) \) where, \( t_o \) is rise-time.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Typical results of series of measurements consistently take the form of curves, as shown in Fig. 2. At small displacements, a normal opto-thermal decay is observed, since the signal is dominated by the contribution from the area of overlap between the excitation and detection areas. When displacement is further increased, a thermal wave becomes apparent with curves displaying a rise in intensity to peak value at time, \( t_o \), before a lingering decay.

![Thermal waves in lead, from back to front, the lateral displacements between heating and detection points are 20, 40, 80, 100, 112, 120, and 128 μm](image)

Fig. 2. Thermal waves in lead, from back to front, the lateral displacements between heating and detection points are 20, 40, 80, 100, 112, 120, and 128 μm

Fig. 3 and 4 show direct proportionality between \( r^2 \) and \( t_0 \), as required in theory, except for deviation at short rise-times. The deviations are much more obvious in Fig. 4, where slopes of the lines are the least. The superposition of opto-thermal decay and thermal wave signals at short rise-times may be responsible for this. Data for short rise-times in Fig. 4 were excluded from the least-squares fit calculation.

![Graph showing square of displacement \( r \) versus rise-time to for high thermal diffusivity](image1)

**Fig. 3. Square of displacement \( r \) versus rise-time to for high thermal diffusivity**

![Graph showing square of displacement \( r \) versus rise-time to for low thermal diffusivity](image2)

**Fig. 4. Square of displacement \( r \) versus rise-time to for low thermal diffusivity**

Table 1 shows that the measured thermal diffusivities are within 16% of the available accepted values. As comparison, the thermal diffusivity measured by Luukkala et al. (1982) was found to be 36% lower than the accepted value. The deviation of the measured values are wider as the thermal diffusivities get smaller. Low thermal diffusivities make measurement difficult because insufficient separation between opto-thermal decay and thermal wave can be obtained.
TABLE 1
Measured and accepted values of thermal diffusivities/(10^5 m^2/s)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Measured</th>
<th>Accepted (from Touloukian et al. 1973)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aluminium</td>
<td>11.21 ± 1.5</td>
<td>9.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graphite foil</td>
<td>7.3 ± 0.8</td>
<td>7.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lead</td>
<td>2.3 ± 0.6</td>
<td>2.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zirconium graphite</td>
<td>1.2 ± 0.2</td>
<td>not available</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CONCLUSION
Diverging thermal wave technique was found best for samples of high thermal diffusivities where thermal waves can be observed at appreciable distances from the heating spots. Further work on theoretical description of the thermal waves to account for optical absorption by the samples and reflections at the interface is in progress. However, with the present theoretical and data analysis, thermal diffusivities measured agree reasonably well with the accepted values. With further developments in experiment and theoretical analysis, this could become an important alternative for measuring absolute thermal diffusivities of condensed media.

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REFERENCES


