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# *Lead-Free Piezoceramics for Energy Transducers*

***Abhishek singh[1], S. Anupriya[2], M. Nandhini[3], P. Sharma[4]***

*Associate Professor[1], Assistant Professor[2, 3, 4]*

*Department of Ceramic Technology and Materials Science*

*Kumaraguru College of Technology Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu*

***Email ID :** Abhishek_singh00@gamil.com[1], sanupriyakkd@yahoo.com[2]*

## *ABSTRACT*

*Piezoelectric materials play a vital role in modern energy transducers, sensors, actuators, and energy harvesting devices. For several decades, lead-based piezoceramics, especially lead zirconate titanate (PZT), have dominated the market due to their excellent piezoelectric and electromechanical properties. However, the toxicity of lead and strict environmental regulations have motivated extensive research toward the development of lead-free piezoceramics. In recent years, lead-free alternatives such as barium titanate ($BaTiO_3$), potassium sodium niobate (KNN), sodium bismuth titanate (NBT), and their solid solutions have shown promising performance for energy transducer applications. This paper presents a comprehensive review of lead-free piezoceramics, focusing on their material chemistry, fabrication routes, structure–property relationships, and suitability for energy transducers. Key challenges such as low piezoelectric coefficients, temperature instability, and processing difficulties are discussed. Recent advancements including compositional modification, grain engineering, and domain wall control are highlighted. The paper also summarizes the performance of lead-free piezoceramics in vibration energy harvesting, ultrasonic transducers, and wearable energy devices. Although lead-free materials still lag behind PZT in some aspects, continuous progress indicates strong potential for sustainable and environmentally friendly energy transducer technologies.*

***KEYWORDS:*** *Lead-free piezoceramics, Energy transducers, Piezoelectric energy harvesting, Barium titanate, Potassium sodium niobate*

 

## INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of portable electronics, wireless sensor networks, and self-powered devices has created strong demand for efficient and sustainable energy transducers. Piezoelectric materials, which can convert mechanical energy into electrical energy and vice versa, are among the most widely used functional materials in energy transduction systems. Traditionally, lead-based piezoceramics, particularly lead zirconate titanate (PZT), have been extensively used due to their high piezoelectric coefficients, large electromechanical coupling factors, and good stability over a wide temperature range.

Despite their excellent performance, lead-based piezoceramics raise serious environmental and health concerns. Lead is a toxic heavy metal, and its usage is restricted by global environmental regulations such as the Restriction of Hazardous Substances (RoHS) and Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) directives. Disposal and recycling of lead-containing devices also pose long-term ecological risks. As a result, the development of lead-free piezoceramics has become a critical research area over the last two decades.

Lead-free piezoceramics aim to replace PZT while maintaining acceptable piezoelectric and mechanical performance. Several material systems have been investigated, including $BaTiO_3$-based, KNN-based, NBT-based, and Bi-based compounds. These materials exhibit ferroelectric and piezoelectric behavior without the use of toxic lead. However, achieving PZT-level performance remains challenging due to issues such as lower piezoelectric coefficients, processing sensitivity, and temperature-dependent properties.

This review paper focuses on lead-free piezoceramics for energy transducer applications. It discusses fundamental principles, major material systems, fabrication techniques, and recent developments aimed at improving performance. Applications in energy harvesting and transducer technologies are also reviewed to provide a holistic understanding of the field.

### Fundamentals of Piezoelectricity and Energy Transducers

Piezoelectricity is a property of certain non-centrosymmetric materials that generate an electric charge when subjected to mechanical stress. Conversely, these materials undergo mechanical deformation when an electric field is applied. This bidirectional electromechanical coupling makes piezoelectric materials suitable for both sensing and actuation.

In energy transducers, piezoelectric materials are primarily used to convert ambient mechanical energy, such as vibrations, pressure, or acoustic waves, into usable electrical energy. The performance of a piezoelectric energy transducer depends on several material parameters, including the piezoelectric coefficient ($d_{33}$ or $d_{31}$), dielectric permittivity, electromechanical coupling factor, mechanical quality factor, and Curie temperature.

Lead-free piezoceramics must satisfy these functional requirements while also offering environmental safety. In practice, trade-offs often exist between piezoelectric performance and material stability. Therefore, understanding the structure–property relationship is essential for optimizing lead-free materials for energy transducer applications.

## MAJOR LEAD-FREE PIEZOCERAMIC MATERIAL SYSTEMS

Lead-free piezoceramic research has mainly focused on perovskite-structured ferroelectric oxides, as this crystal structure is known to support strong spontaneous polarization and piezoelectric coupling. Among various candidates, $BaTiO_3$-, KNN-, and NBT-based systems have emerged as the most promising due to their relatively good electromechanical properties and compositional flexibility. This section elaborates on the key characteristics, modifications, and limitations of these material systems, with emphasis on their relevance to energy transducer applications.

### 1. Barium Titanate ($BaTiO_3$)-Based Ceramics

Barium titanate ($BaTiO_3$) is one of the earliest ferroelectric ceramics discovered and remains a cornerstone material in the development of lead-free piezoceramics. It possesses a classical perovskite structure ($ABO_3$), where $Ba^{2+}$ occupies the A-site and $Ti^{4+}$ occupies the B-site. $BaTiO_3$ undergoes a series of temperature-dependent phase transitions (rhombohedral–orthorhombic–tetragonal–cubic), which strongly influence its dielectric and piezoelectric behavior. Near these phase transition temperatures, enhanced polarization rotation and domain wall mobility result in improved piezoelectric response.

$BaTiO_3$-based ceramics are attractive for energy transducers due to their low raw material cost, ease of fabrication using conventional solid-state routes, and good chemical stability. They are also widely used in multilayer ceramic capacitors, demonstrating excellent industrial scalability. However, the main drawback of pure $BaTiO_3$ is its relatively low piezoelectric coefficient (typically $d_{33}$ < 200 pC/N) and low Curie temperature (~120 °C), which restricts its use in high-temperature or high-power transducer applications.

To overcome these limitations, extensive research has focused on chemical modification and solid solution design. Dopants such as calcium ($Ca^{2+}$) at the A-site and zirconium ($Zr^{4+}$) or tin ($Sn^{4+}$) at the B-site are commonly introduced to tailor lattice distortion and phase stability. Among these developments, $Ba(Zr,Ti)O_3$–$(Ba,Ca)TiO_3$ (BZT–BCT) solid solutions have attracted significant attention. These materials exhibit a morphotropic phase boundary (MPB)-like region, where multiple ferroelectric phases coexist. The presence of such a boundary enhances polarization rotation and domain switching, leading to piezoelectric coefficients exceeding 400 pC/N in some compositions.

Due to these improvements, $BaTiO_3$-based ceramics, especially BCZT systems, are considered strong candidates for low- to medium-temperature energy transducers, vibration energy harvesters, and environmentally friendly sensors.

**2. Potassium Sodium Niobate (KNN)-Based Ceramics**

Potassium sodium niobate, with the chemical formula $(K_{0.5}Na_{0.5})NbO_3$, is one of the most extensively investigated lead-free piezoceramic systems. KNN-based materials also adopt a perovskite structure and exhibit relatively high Curie temperatures, typically around 400–420 °C, making them suitable for applications requiring thermal stability. Compared to $BaTiO_3$-based ceramics, KNN systems generally offer higher piezoelectric coefficients and better temperature tolerance.

The piezoelectric performance of KNN ceramics can be significantly enhanced through compositional modification, such as Li, Ta, Sb, or Bi doping. These additives can induce polymorphic phase transitions or MPB-like regions, which improve electromechanical coupling. Optimized KNN-based ceramics have reported $d_{33}$ values approaching those of soft PZT, making them attractive for energy harvesting and actuator applications.

Despite their promising properties, KNN-based ceramics face serious processing challenges. The volatility of alkali elements (K and Na) during high-temperature sintering often leads to non-stoichiometry, abnormal grain growth, and poor densification. This results in property degradation and reproducibility issues. To address these problems, advanced processing methods such as hot pressing, spark plasma sintering, and atmosphere-controlled sintering have been employed. Additionally, grain boundary engineering and liquid-phase sintering aids are used to improve density and microstructural uniformity.

With continued improvements in processing control, KNN-based ceramics are considered among the most promising lead-free alternatives for high-performance energy transducers.

## 3. Sodium Bismuth Titanate (NBT)-Based Ceramics

Sodium bismuth titanate ($Na_{0.5}Bi_{0.5}TiO_3$) is another important lead-free ferroelectric material characterized by strong spontaneous polarization and high depolarization temperatures. NBT-based ceramics exhibit complex domain structures and relaxor-like behavior, which can be advantageous for certain energy harvesting applications. Their relatively high mechanical strength and fatigue resistance make them suitable for repeated loading conditions.

NBT is rarely used in its pure form due to its high coercive field and large dielectric losses. Instead, it is commonly combined with other perovskite materials such as $BaTiO_3$ or KNN to form solid solutions. These modifications help reduce coercive fields, enhance domain mobility, and improve piezoelectric response. NBT–BT and NBT–KNN systems have shown moderate piezoelectric coefficients and improved thermal stability compared to $BaTiO_3$-based ceramics.

However, high dielectric losses and strong temperature dependence of properties still limit the efficiency of NBT-based ceramics in some transducer applications. Ongoing research focuses on defect engineering, dopant optimization, and domain structure control to minimize losses and enhance long-term reliability.

## 4. Other Emerging Lead-Free Systems

In addition to the major perovskite systems discussed above, several emerging lead-free piezoceramic materials are being actively explored. Bismuth ferrite ($BiFeO_3$) is of particular interest due to its multiferroic nature, exhibiting both ferroelectric and magnetic ordering. This multifunctionality opens opportunities for coupled energy transduction and sensing applications, although high leakage currents remain a challenge.

Tungsten bronze-type ceramics and layered perovskites represent another class of lead-free materials with good high-temperature stability and anisotropic properties. These materials are suitable for specialized applications such as high-frequency or high-temperature transducers, although their piezoelectric coefficients are generally lower than those of perovskite-based systems.

Overall, while emerging lead-free systems may not yet rival PZT in terms of piezoelectric performance, their unique functional properties and environmental benefits make them promising candidates for future energy transducer technologies.

## FABRICATION AND PROCESSING TECHNIQUES

The performance of lead-free piezoceramics is highly dependent on fabrication methods. Conventional solid-state reaction is widely used due to its simplicity, but it often results in inhomogeneous microstructures. Alternative techniques such as sol–gel processing, hydrothermal synthesis spark plasma sintering, and tape casting have been investigated to improve densification and grain control.

Grain size engineering plays a crucial role in enhancing piezoelectric properties. Fine-grained ceramics may show reduced domain wall motion, while excessively large grains can lead to mechanical fragility. Therefore, optimized sintering conditions are essential for achieving balanced properties.

## STRUCTURE–PROPERTY RELATIONSHIPS

The piezoelectric behavior of lead-free ceramics is strongly influenced by crystal structure, phase coexistence, and domain configuration. Materials exhibiting phase boundaries or polymorphic phase transitions often show enhanced piezoelectric response due to increased polarization rotation. Compositional tuning is widely used to achieve such favorable structures.

Defect chemistry also plays a significant role. Donor and acceptor doping can modify domain wall mobility, electrical conductivity, and aging behavior. Understanding these mechanisms is important for designing reliable energy transducers.

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## APPLICATIONS IN ENERGY TRANSDUCER

The primary motivation for developing lead-free piezoceramics is their application in environmentally sustainable energy transducers. These materials are capable of converting various forms of mechanical energy into electrical energy and vice versa, enabling their use in energy harvesting, sensing, actuation, and signal transmission. Although lead-free ceramics generally show slightly lower performance compared to PZT, continuous material optimization has made them suitable for several practical applications. This section elaborates on major application areas relevant to energy transducers.

### 1. Piezoelectric Energy Harvesting

Piezoelectric energy harvesting is one of the most actively researched applications of lead-free piezoceramics. In such systems, ambient mechanical energy from sources such as vibrations, human motion, machinery operation, or structural oscillations is converted into electrical energy. Cantilever-based energy harvesters are commonly employed due to their simple design and high strain concentration at the fixed end.

Lead-free materials such as $BaTiO_3$-, KNN-, and NBT-based ceramics have been successfully integrated into vibration energy harvesters. $BaTiO_3$-based ceramics are particularly suitable for low-frequency vibration environments due to their relatively high dielectric constant and stable performance. Modified BCZT compositions have demonstrated improved power density, making them viable for powering low-energy devices such as wireless sensor nodes, condition monitoring systems, and microelectronic components.

KNN-based ceramics, with their higher Curie temperature and superior piezoelectric coefficients, are preferred for energy harvesting applications involving higher operating temperatures or larger mechanical stresses. Studies have reported that optimized KNN-based harvesters can generate output power comparable to soft PZT under controlled conditions. However, issues related to brittleness and processing reproducibility still need attention.

Overall, lead-free piezoelectric energy harvesters are well suited for self-powered systems where environmental safety, long-term sustainability, and moderate power output are more critical than peak performance.

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## 2. Ultrasonic and Acoustic Transducers

Ultrasonic and acoustic transducers represent another important application domain for lead-free piezoceramics. These transducers are widely used in medical imaging, nondestructive testing (NDT), underwater acoustics, and industrial sensing. In such applications, piezoceramic materials must exhibit good electromechanical coupling, stable resonance behavior, and low dielectric losses.

Lead-free ceramics such as KNN- and NBT-based systems have shown promising performance in ultrasonic transducer applications. KNN ceramics, in particular, are attractive due to their high Curie temperature and relatively high mechanical quality factor, which are beneficial for high-power ultrasonic devices. $BaTiO_3$-based ceramics are also used in low-frequency acoustic transducers and hydrophones due to their good dielectric stability.

Although lead-free materials still generally lag behind PZT in terms of bandwidth and sensitivity, advances in compositional design, multilayer architectures, and composite transducer structures have significantly narrowed the performance gap. As a result, lead-free ultrasonic transducers are increasingly considered for applications where environmental regulations or bio-compatibility are critical.

## 3. Wearable and Flexible Energy Devices

The growing demand for wearable electronics and portable health monitoring systems has driven interest in flexible and lightweight energy transducers. Lead-free piezoceramics have been incorporated into polymer–ceramic composites and thin-film structures to enable mechanical flexibility while retaining piezoelectric functionality.

In wearable energy devices, mechanical energy generated from human motion, such as walking, bending, or breathing, is harvested using piezoelectric elements embedded in textiles, footwear, or flexible substrates. $BaTiO_3$ and NBT-based ceramics are commonly used in such applications due to their chemical stability and ease of processing into fine powders or thin films.

Recent studies have demonstrated that lead-free piezoceramic composites can generate sufficient electrical output to power low-energy wearable sensors, signal conditioners, and data

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transmission modules. In addition to energy harvesting, these devices can function as self-powered sensors capable of monitoring strain, pressure, or physiological signals.

Despite their potential, challenges remain in achieving long-term durability, mechanical robustness, and stable performance under repeated deformation. Future developments are expected to focus on improved composite design, interface engineering, and scalable fabrication techniques to enable widespread adoption of lead-free wearable energy transducers.

## CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

Despite significant progress, several challenges remain in the commercialization of lead-free piezoceramics. These include lower piezoelectric performance compared to PZT, sensitivity to processing conditions, and long-term reliability issues. Standardization and large-scale manufacturing are also critical concerns.

Future research is expected to focus on hybrid material systems, advanced domain engineering, and integration with flexible substrates. With continued interdisciplinary efforts, lead-free piezoceramics are likely to play a key role in next-generation energy transducers.

***Table 1: Comparison of Major Lead-Free Piezoceramic Systems***

| Material System | Typical $d_{33}$ (pC/N) | Curie Temperature (°C) | Key Advantages | Limitations |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| $BaTiO_3$-based | 150–300 | ~120 | Low cost, stable | Low temperature stability |
| KNN-based | 200–400 | ~420 | High Curie temp | Processing difficulty |
| NBT-based | 100–250 | ~320 | High strength | High coercive field |

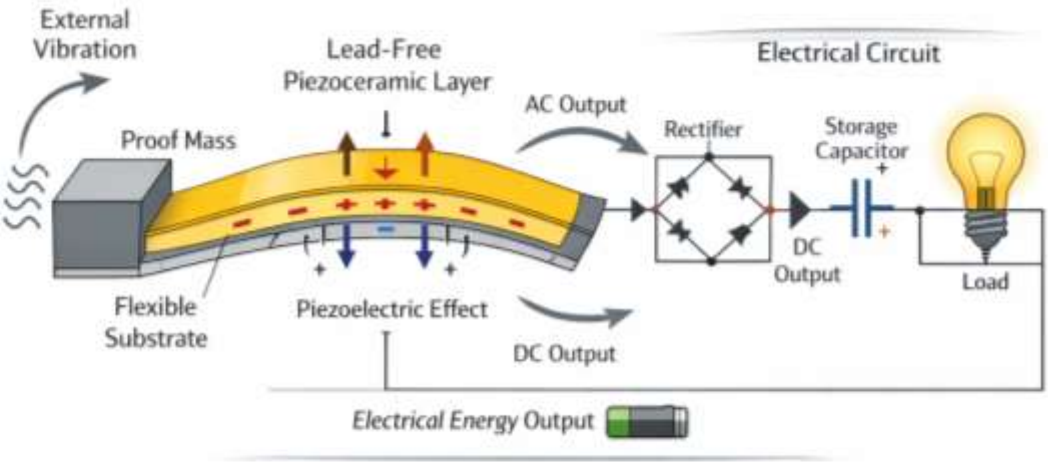


*Figure 1: Schematic Representation of a Piezoelectric Energy Transducer*

## CONCLUSION

Lead-free piezoceramics have emerged as promising alternatives to conventional lead-based materials for energy transducer applications. Significant progress has been achieved in understanding material chemistry, processing methods, and structure–property relationships. Although challenges such as lower piezoelectric coefficients and processing sensitivity remain, recent advancements indicate that lead-free systems can meet the requirements of many practical applications. Continued research and optimization are essential for achieving sustainable, high-performance, and environmentally friendly piezoelectric energy transducers.

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