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Thermal Conductivity Enhancement in Water-Based Nanofluids for Heat Transfer Applications

Prof. Mahendra Rathore[1], Sunita Shekhawat[2]

ABSTRACT

The performance of cooling and heat-exchange systems is limited by the modest thermal conductivity of conventional fluids such as water, and dispersing nanometre-sized solid particles to form a nanofluid is a promising way to raise it. The enhancement depends on the type and concentration of the nanoparticles. This paper reports an experimental study of the thermal conductivity enhancement of water-based nanofluids for heat transfer applications, comparing alumina and copper-oxide nanoparticles across a range of low volume fractions. Stable nanofluids were prepared by dispersing the nanoparticles in distilled water with a surfactant and ultrasonication, and their thermal conductivity was measured by the transient hot-wire method. The thermal conductivity rose steadily with volume fraction for both nanofluids, and the copper-oxide nanofluid enhanced conductivity more than the alumina one at every concentration, reaching about twenty-one percent enhancement at one percent volume fraction. The greater enhancement of the copper-oxide nanofluid reflects the higher intrinsic conductivity of its particles. The results confirm that nanofluids can substantially improve the thermal conductivity of water, with the choice of nanoparticle an important design variable for heat transfer.

KEYWORDS: *nanofluid, thermal conductivity, heat transfer, nanoparticles, volume fraction, transient hot-wire*

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INTRODUCTION

Efficient transfer of heat is central to applications from electronics cooling to power generation, yet the fluids commonly used to carry heat, such as water and oils, conduct it relatively poorly. This limits the performance of heat exchangers and cooling systems, motivating the search for fluids with higher thermal conductivity (1). Suspending highly conductive solid nanoparticles in a base fluid, forming a nanofluid, is one of the most studied approaches (2).

Because the solid nanoparticles conduct heat far better than the liquid, even a small volume fraction can raise the effective conductivity of the suspension appreciably, and the nanometre size keeps the particles dispersed and limits settling and erosion. The magnitude of the enhancement depends on the material, size, and concentration of the particles, as well as on how stably they are dispersed (3). Comparing different nanoparticles under the same conditions clarifies these dependencies.

This paper reports an experimental study of the thermal conductivity enhancement of water-based nanofluids, comparing alumina and copper-oxide nanoparticles across low volume fractions. The nanofluids are prepared with surfactant and ultrasonication and measured by the transient hot-wire method, with enhancement as a function of volume fraction the key result (4).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Nanofluids have been studied intensively since their introduction, with research addressing their preparation, stability, and the mechanisms by which they enhance thermal conductivity. Many nanoparticle materials and base fluids have been examined (5).

Enhancement Mechanisms and Stability

Studies report that thermal conductivity increases with nanoparticle volume fraction and that nanoparticles of higher intrinsic conductivity give larger enhancement, broadly in line with effective-medium expectations though often exceeding them. Mechanisms such as Brownian motion and interfacial layering are invoked to explain the excess, and the literature stresses that stable dispersion, achieved through surfactants and ultrasonication, is essential for reproducible results (6).

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- Thermal conductivity increases with nanoparticle volume fraction.
- Particles of higher intrinsic conductivity give greater enhancement.
- Brownian motion and interfacial layering contribute to the enhancement.
- Stable dispersion is essential for reproducible measurements.

Even so, a controlled side-by-side comparison of two nanoparticle types across the same low volume fractions, prepared and measured identically, remains valuable for isolating the effect of particle material (7).

RESEARCH GAP

Although nanofluids are widely studied, directly comparing alumina and copper-oxide nanofluids prepared and measured under identical conditions across the same range of low volume fractions, to isolate the influence of particle material on enhancement, remains a useful contribution (8).

This study addresses this by preparing both nanofluids by the same route and measuring their thermal conductivity enhancement over identical volume fractions.

OBJECTIVES

- To prepare stable water-based alumina and copper-oxide nanofluids.
- To measure their thermal conductivity across a range of low volume fractions.
- To compare the enhancement of the two nanoparticle types.
- To relate the enhancement to nanoparticle material and concentration.

METHODOLOGY

Nanofluids were prepared by dispersing alumina or copper-oxide nanoparticles in distilled water and stabilising the suspension. Their thermal conductivity was measured at several volume fractions.

Nanofluid Preparation

The preparation and measurement parameters are summarised in Table 1. Alumina and copper-oxide nanoparticles of nominally forty-nanometre size were dispersed in distilled water at volume fractions from a fifth of a percent to one percent, with a surfactant added and the suspension ultrasonicated to break up agglomerates and ensure stable, uniform dispersion before measurement.

Table 1: Preparation and measurement parameters

Parameter	Value
Base fluid	Distilled water
Nanoparticles	Al_2O_3 and CuO
Particle size	40 nm (nominal)
Volume fraction	0.2 to 1.0 %
Stabilisation	Surfactant and ultrasonication
Measurement	Transient hot-wire method

Thermal Conductivity Measurement

The thermal conductivity of each nanofluid was measured by the transient hot-wire method, in which a fine wire immersed in the fluid is heated briefly and its temperature rise, governed by the surrounding fluid's conductivity, is recorded. The base fluid was measured for reference, and the enhancement was calculated as the fractional increase in conductivity relative to distilled water at the same temperature.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Both nanofluids enhanced thermal conductivity, with copper oxide consistently ahead. The enhancement against volume fraction for the two nanofluids is shown in Figure 2.

The measured thermal conductivities and the copper-oxide enhancement at several volume fractions are summarised in Table 2.

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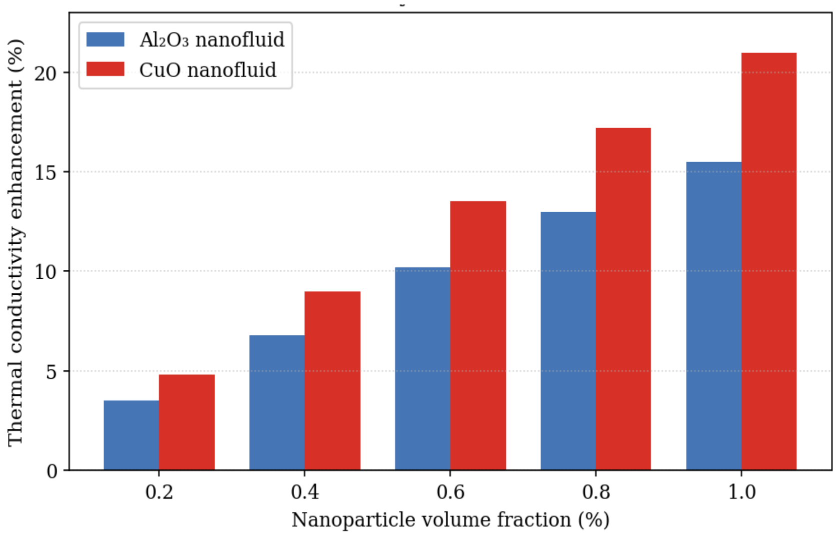

Figure 2: Thermal conductivity enhancement versus volume fraction

As shown in Figure 2, the thermal conductivity enhancement increased steadily with volume fraction for both nanofluids, and the copper-oxide nanofluid enhanced conductivity more than the alumina one at every concentration. As reported in Table 2, the copper-oxide nanofluid reached about twenty-one percent enhancement at one percent volume fraction, compared with about fifteen and a half percent for alumina, reflecting the higher intrinsic thermal conductivity of copper-oxide particles relative to alumina.

Table 2: Thermal conductivity and enhancement by volume fraction

Volume fraction (%)	Al_2O_3 (W/mK)	CuO (W/mK)	CuO enh. (%)
0.2	0.628	0.636	4.8
0.4	0.648	0.662	9.0
0.6	0.669	0.689	13.5
0.8	0.686	0.711	17.2
1.0	0.701	0.734	21.0

DISCUSSION

The steady rise of conductivity with volume fraction is expected, since adding more highly conductive solid to the fluid increases the effective conductivity of the mixture, and the near-linear trend over this low-concentration range is consistent with the behaviour reported for dilute nanofluids. The consistent superiority of the copper-oxide nanofluid follows directly from the higher intrinsic conductivity of copper oxide compared with alumina, so that each unit of added particle contributes more (9).

Mechanisms beyond simple mixing, such as the Brownian motion of the particles and the ordered liquid layer at their surfaces, are commonly invoked to explain enhancements that exceed classical predictions, and the importance of stable dispersion is underlined by the role of the surfactant and ultrasonication in obtaining reproducible values. The principal practical concerns are the long-term stability of the suspension and the increase in viscosity that accompanies higher loading, which can offset the heat-transfer benefit; studying stability and the viscosity penalty are important directions for further work (10).

CONCLUSION

This paper reported the thermal conductivity enhancement of water-based alumina and copper-oxide nanofluids across low volume fractions. The conductivity rose steadily with volume fraction for both, and the copper-oxide nanofluid enhanced it more at every concentration, reaching about twenty-one percent at one percent volume fraction, reflecting the higher intrinsic conductivity of its particles. The results confirm that nanofluids can substantially improve the thermal conductivity of water, with the choice of nanoparticle an important design variable for heat transfer applications.

LIMITATIONS

- Only low volume fractions up to one percent were investigated.
- Long-term stability of the suspensions was not assessed.
- The viscosity increase accompanying nanoparticle loading was not measured.

FUTURE SCOPE

- Assessing the long-term stability of the prepared nanofluids.
- Measuring the viscosity penalty alongside the conductivity enhancement.
- Extending the study to hybrid nanofluids combining two particle types.
- Evaluating performance in a working heat-exchanger system.

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***Author for Correspondence**

Sunita Shekhawat

E-mail: sunita.shekhawat36@gmail.com

[1]Professor, Department of Physics, B K Birla Institute of Engineering & Technology

[2]PG Scholar, Department of Physics, B K Birla Institute of Engineering & Technology

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