

**THE ABSOLUTE METHOD OF NEUTRON ACTIVATION ANALYSIS USING
TRIGA NEUTRON REACTOR, NUCLEAR AGENCY, MALAYSIA**

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To beloved my mom and dad.

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ABSTRACT

Neutron activation analysis (NAA) offers excellent sensitivities that are superior to other analytical techniques in performing identification and quantitative elemental analysis. The technique involves the irradiation of samples and the detection of gamma energies emitted from the isotopes formed from the process of neutron capture. Most NAA were done by comparison method, which is found to have high errors due to the differences in the matrix composition of sample as well as comparator. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate an alternative technique of activation analysis based on absolute gamma ray measurements and the direct calculation of elemental concentrations from reaction rates equation of neutron capture process. The efficiency of the gamma-ray spectrometer as well as the neutron spectrum parameters, thermal and epithermal neutron flux at four characterized irradiation position of 10, 22, 27, and 31 in the rotary rack 1-MW TRIGA reactor at Malaysia Nuclear Agency was determined. The accuracy and precision of this absolute NAA technique were verified by analyzing two certified reference materials, Soil-1 and Soil-7 provided by IAEA. The experimental results for both the materials irradiated at the four characterized irradiation positions were found to be in good agreement with the certified values. The average Z-score for the concentration values were below two signified that the concentration results were accepted for most elements. In conclusion, the proposed technique can be applied for many of future activation analyses with high accuracy without having to rely on the availability of standard samples.

ABSTRAK

Analisis pengaktifan neutron (NAA) memberikan kepekaan yang tinggi berbanding dengan teknik analisis yang lain dalam mengenalpasti elemen dan analisis kuantitatif elemen. Teknik ini melibatkan penyinaran sampel dan penentuan tenaga gama yang dipancarkan oleh isotop yang terbentuk daripada proses penangkapan neutron. Kebanyakan NAA menggunakan kaedah perbandingan yang mempunyai ralat yang tinggi disebabkan perbezaan komposisi matriks di antara sampel dan sampel perbandingan. Tujuan kajian ini adalah melaksanakan kaedah alternatif analisis pengaktifan neutron iaitu kaedah mutlak berdasarkan pengukuran mutlak sinar gama dan pengiraan terus kepekatan elemen daripada persamaan kaedah tindak balas proses penangkapan neutron. Kecekapan spektrometer sinaran gama dan parameter spektrum neutron, fluks terma dan epiterma diukur pada lokasi penyinaran 10, 22, 27, dan 31 di rak berputar 1-MW TRIGA reaktor Agensi Nuklear Malaysia. Kejituan dan ketepatan kaedah mutlak ini ditentusahkan dengan menganalisis dua sampel piawai Soil-1 dan Soil-7 yang dibekalkan oleh IAEA. Keputusan eksperimen terhadap kedua-dua sampel piawai pada keempat-empat kedudukan penyinaran didapati menunjukkan persamaan yang baik dengan nilai yang disahkan. Nilai purata Z-skor kurang daripada dua menunjukkan keputusan analisis boleh diterimapakai untuk kebanyakan elemen secara tepat. Secara keseluruhannya, teknik yang dicadangkan boleh digunapakai untuk analisis pengaktifan neutron pada masa hadapan dengan ketepatan yang tinggi tanpa bergantung kepada bahan piawai.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	TITLE	PAGE
	DECLARATION	ii
	DEDICATION	iii
	ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	iv
	ABSTRACT	v
	ABSTRAK	vi
	TABLE OF CONTENTS	vii
	LIST OF FIGURES	xi
	LIST OF TABLES	xiv
	LIST OF SYMBOLS	xviii
	LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	xx
	LIST OF APPENDICES	xxi
I	INTRODUCTION	
	1.0 Introduction of NAA	1
	1.1 Background of Study	2
	1.2 Statement of Problem	3
	1.3 Purpose of Research	4
	1.4 Objectives of Research	4
	1.5 Significant of Research	5
	1.6 Research Scope	5

II LITERATURE REVIEWS

2.0	Introduction	7
2.1	Neutron Sources	8
2.2	Nuclear Reaction	10
2.3	The Trend of NAA	11
	2.4.1 Relative Method	12
	2.4.2 Ko- Standardization Method	13

III THEORY

3.1	Neutron Activation Equations	15
3.2	HOGDAHL Reaction Rate	16
3.3	Non-ideal $1/E^{1+\alpha}$ Epithermal Neutron Flux Distribution	17
3.4	Determination of α and f parameter	19
	3.4.1 The Cadmium ratio multi monitor method	20
	3.4.2 Error Analysis of α parameter	22
3.5	Epithermal and thermal neutron flux	24
3.6	Full-Energy Peak Detection Efficiency	28

IV METHODOLOGY

4.0	Introduction	32
4.1	TRIGA Puspati Reactor (RTP)	33
4.2	Gamma-ray Spectrometry	35
4.3	Calibration of gamma ray spectrometer	36
4.4	Determination of reactor neutron spectrum parameters	38
4.5	Analysis of Environmental reference materials	40

V RESULT AND DISCUSSION

5.0	Introduction	42
5.1	Calibration of Detector Efficiency	42
5.1.1	Ortec Detector Calibration	43
5.1.2	Canberra Detector Calibration	48
5.2	Result of α by the Cd ratio	54
5.2.1	Result of α at Irradiation Position 10	54
5.2.2	Result of α at Irradiation Position 22	57
5.2.3	Result of α at Irradiation Position 27	58
5.2.4	Result of α at Irradiation Position 31	60
5.3	Calculation of Thermal to Epithermal Flux Ratio	62
5.4	Thermal and Epithermal Neutron Flux Results	63
5.5	HOGDAHL Reaction Rate for Irradiated Elements	65
5.6	Elemental Analysis Using NAA Absolute Method	70

VI CONCLUSION

6.0	Conclusion	89
6.1	Recommendation	90

REFERENCES 91

APPENDIX A 95

APPENDIX B 96

APPENDIX C 97

APPENDIX D 98

APPENDIX E 99

PUBLICATIONS 100

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE NO	TITLE	PAGE
2.1	Nuclear Chain Reaction	8
2.2	Gamma Spectra from a Sample of Pottery	11
3.1	A reactor neutron spectrum is contributions from a purely Maxwellian shape in the thermal energy region, an epithermal region and negligible fast spectrum	25
3.2	The spectrum observed by detector contribute by interaction of gamma ray with germanium.	29
3.3	An example of ideal efficiency curve plotted against gamma energy	31
4.1	TRIGA Puspati Reactor (RTP) with power of 1 Megawatt	33
4.2	Reactor rotary racks with experimental irradiation facility	34
4.3	HPGe detector operated at liquid nitrogen temperature	35
4.4	Set up of gamma ray spectrometer	36

4.5	Canberra GC3018 detector with Genie 2000 Software	37
4.6	Ortec GEM-10185 detector with Gamma Vision software	37
4.7	2 set of monitors irradiated with bare condition and cadmium cover respectively	39
4.8	IAEA lake sediment sample sealed in a labeled plastic and irradiated with standard polyethylene vial	41
5.1	Full energy peak detection efficiency curve for Ortec detector at three sample-detector distances	48
5.2	Full energy peak detection efficiency curve for Canberra detector at three sample- detector distances	53
5.3	Parameter α measurement at position 10 of rotary rack TRIGA reactor	56
5.4	Parameter α measurement at position 22 of rotary rack TRIGA reactor	58
5.5	Parameter α measurement at position 27 of rotary rack TRIGA reactor	59
5.6	Parameter α measurement at position 31 of rotary rack TRIGA reactor	61
5.7	IAEA Soil-1 elements at irradiation position of 10 in rotary rack	81
5.8	IAEA Soil-7 elements at irradiation position of	82

	10 in rotary rack	
5.9	IAEA Soil-1 elements at irradiation position of 22 in rotary rack	83
5.10	IAEA Soil-7 elements at irradiation position of 22 in rotary rack	84
5.11	IAEA Soil-1 elements at irradiation position of 27 in rotary rack	85
5.12	IAEA Soil-7 elements at irradiation position of 27 in rotary rack	86
5.13	IAEA Soil-1 elements at irradiation position of 31 in rotary rack	87
5.14	IAEA Soil-7 elements at irradiation position of 31 in rotary rack	88

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE NO.	TITLE	PAGE
3.1	Three main neutron groups	25
3.2	The nuclear data of gold used in calculating thermal and epithermal neutron fluxes	28
4.1	Monitors and relevant nuclear data require in the work.	40
5.1	Activity and Information on Radioactive Gamma Sources	43
5.2	Standard gamma sources efficiency at the distance of 10 cm from Ortec detector	44
5.3	Standard gamma sources efficiency at the of 6 cm from Ortec detector	45
5.4	Standard gamma sources efficiency at the distance of 2 cm from Ortec detector	46
5.5	Parameters P_1 to P_5 determined at the distance of 10 cm from Ortec detector	47
5.6	Parameters P_1 to P_5 determined at the distance of 6 cm from Ortec detector	47

5.7	Parameters P_1 to P_5 determined at the distance of 2 cm from Ortec detector	47
5.8	Standard gamma sources efficiency at the distance of 12 cm from Canberra detector	49
5.9	Standard gamma sources efficiency at the distance of 8 cm from Canberra detector	50
5.10	Standard gamma sources efficiency at the distance of 2 cm from Canberra detector	51
5.11	Parameters P_1 to P_5 determined at the distance of 12 cm from Canberra detector	52
5.12	Parameters P_1 to P_5 determined at the distance of 8 cm from Canberra detector	52
5.13	Parameters P_1 to P_5 determined at the distance of 2 cm from Canberra detector	52
5.14	Specific activities for 5 monitors irradiated bare and with cadmium cover at irradiation position 10 of the rotary rack	55
5.15	Result of α parameter at irradiation position 10 calculated by iterative linear regression method	56
5.16	Specific activities for 5 monitors irradiated bare and with cadmium cover at irradiation position 22 of the rotary rack	57
5.17	Result of α parameter at irradiation position 22 calculated by iterative linear regression method	57
5.18	Specific activities for 5 monitors irradiated bare	58

	and with cadmium cover at irradiation position 27 of the rotary rack	
5.19	Result of α parameter at irradiation position 27 calculated by iterative linear regression method	59
5.20	Specific activities for 5 monitors irradiated bare and with cadmium cover at irradiation position 31 of the rotary rack	60
5.21	Result of α parameter at irradiation position 31 calculated by iterative linear regression method	60
5.22	The results of thermal to epithermal flux ratio of corresponding irradiation positions	63
5.23	Activity of bare gold at irradiation positions 10, 22, 27, and 31 of rotary rack TRIGA reactor	63
5.24	Activity of gold irradiated with cadmium cover at irradiation positions 10, 22, 27, and 31 of the rotary rack TRIGA reactor	64
5.25	The results of thermal and epithermal neutron of flux corresponding irradiation position	64
5.26	HOGDAHL reaction rate for elements irradiated at irradiation position 10 of rotary rack	66
5.27	HOGDAHL reaction rate for elements irradiated at irradiation position 22 of rotary rack	67
5.28	HOGDAHL reaction rate for elements irradiated at irradiation position 27 of rotary rack	68
5.29	HOGDAHL reaction rate for elements irradiated	69

	at irradiation position 31 of rotary rack	
5.30	The criterion for Z-score	71
5.31	IAEA Soil-1 result at irradiation position 10 by absolute method	73
5.32	IAEA Soil-7 result at irradiation position 10 by absolute method	74
5.33	IAEA Soil-1 result at irradiation position 22 by absolute method	75
5.34	IAEA Soil-7 result at irradiation position 22 by absolute method	76
5.35	IAEA Soil-1 result at irradiation position 27 by absolute method	77
5.36	IAEA Soil-7 result at irradiation position 27 by absolute method	78
5.37	IAEA Soil-1 result at irradiation position 31 by absolute method	79
5.38	IAEA Soil-7 result at irradiation position 31 by absolute method	80

LIST OF SYMBOLS

α	- Epithermal shape parameter
f	- Thermal to epithermal flux ratio
φ_{th}	- Thermal neutron flux
φ_{epi}	- Epithermal neutron flux
t_i	- Irradiation time
t_d	- Decay time
t_m	- Counting time
A_0	- Activity of irradiated sample
N_A	- Avogadro's number
θ	- Natural isotopic abundance
M	- Atomic weight
R	- HOGDAHL Reaction Rate
S	- Correction factors for saturation during irradiation
D	- Correction factors for decay between irradiation and γ counting
C	- Correction factors for decay during counting
m	- Mass of the target element
N_p	- full energy peak net count
γ	- Gamma abundance
$\varepsilon_\gamma(E)$	- Detector efficiency at gamma energy
N	- Number of interacting isotopes
$\sigma(E)$	- Cross-section in cm^2 at neutron energy of E in eV
$\varphi(E)$	- Neutron flux per unit of energy interval

σ_o	- Thermal neutron capture cross section at 2200 ms ⁻¹
I_o	- Resonance integral for a 1/E spectrum
$I_o(\alpha)$	- Resonance integral valid for 1/E ^{1+α} spectrum
E_{cd}	- Cadmium cut-off energy
$Q_o(\alpha)$	- α - corrected Q_o
Q_o	- I_o/σ_o ratio of resonance integral to (n, γ) cross section
E_r	- Effective resonance energy
R_{cd}	- Ratio of the specific count rates of the samples irradiated without and with a cadmium cover
A_{bare}	- Activity of bare monitor
A_{cd}	- Activity of monitor covered with cadmium
F_{cd}	- Ratio of the activity of a monitor with a zero cadmium cover thickness
$Z_\alpha(A_{sp},n)$	- Specific count rate random error
$Z_\alpha(A_{sp},n)_{bare}$	- Bare specific count rate random error
$Z_\alpha(A_{sp},n)_{cd}$	- Cadmium specific count rate random error
$Z_\alpha(F_{cd},n)$	- Systematic errors of F_{cd}
$Z_\alpha(Q_o,n)$	- Systematic errors of Q_o
$Z_\alpha(E_r,n)$	- Systematic errors of E_r
$Z_\alpha(E_{cd},n)$	- Systematic errors of E_{cd}
$S_{\alpha,T}$	- Overall uncertainty of α parameter
n	- Number of neutron per volume
v	- Velocity of the neutron.
P_i	- The fitted parameters of the function
E	- Gamma energy of the i_{th} photopeak in MeV
$t_{1/2}$	- Half Life
Z	- Z-score

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

NAA	- Neutron Activation Analysis
HPGe	- High-purity germanium detector
FNAA	- Fast Neutron Activation Analysis
PGNAA	- Prompt Gamma Ray Neutron Activation Analysis
NAA	- Neutron Activation Analysis
MNA	- Malaysia Nuclear Agency
CRM	- Certified Reference Materials
MNA	- Malaysia Nuclear Agency

LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX NO.	TITLE	PAGE
A	Scheme of Neutron Activation Analysis absolute method in determination the concentration of element	95
B	Cd ratio for multi monitor method with 5 monitors at irradiation position 10 of the TRIGA reactor rotary rack	96
C	Cd ratio for multi monitor method with 5 monitors at irradiation position 22 of the TRIGA reactor rotary rack	97
D	Cd ratio for multi monitor method with 5 monitors at irradiation position 27 of the TRIGA reactor rotary rack	98
E	Cd ratio for multi monitor method with 5 monitors at irradiation position 31 of the TRIGA reactor rotary rack	99

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

Neutron activation analysis (NAA) was first discovered in 1936 and offers excellent sensitivities and is superior to other analytical techniques. NAA perform both qualitative and quantitative identification for a wide variety of materials in solid, liquid, or gaseous states. The reason for the high sensitivity is that the cross section of neutron activation is high in the thermal region for majority of the elements. Because of its vast range of potential applications, neutron activation analysis is utilized extensively in field such as geological science, medicine, agriculture, soil science, and environmental studies.

Neutron activation analysis is a physical technique based on the nuclear method. This technique is a non-destructive form of analysis. It can be used without damaging the materials being tested and minimizing the risk for loss and contamination. The undisputable advantage of this analytical technique is its multi-elemental character which enables simultaneous determination of many elements without chemical separation. Moreover, NAA is capable of detecting many elements at low concentrations. Nearly 70% of elements in the Periodic Table can be analyzed

by NAA.

1.1 Background of Study

There is a wide distribution of neutron energy in a reactor. The neutron spectrum consists of three principal components (thermal, epithermal and fast neutrons) based on their kinetic energies. In most reactor, thermal neutrons component are dominant and slow neutrons are fully moderated within the reactor with kinetic energies < 0.5 eV. Activation with epithermal neutrons is known as Epithermal NAA. Cadmium or boron is used as thermal neutron filter. These neutrons have been partially moderated and consist of kinetic energies of 0.5 eV to 0.5 MeV. Activation with fast neutrons (kinetic energies > 0.5 MeV) is termed of Fast NAA (FNAA).

In principal, NAA falls into two categories depending on the time of measurement. Prompt gamma ray neutron activation analysis (PGNAA) measures gamma ray emitted during the irradiation while delayed gamma ray neutron activation analysis measures gamma ray as a result of radioactive decay.

There are three standard methods of NAA: relative method, k_0 -standardization method and absolute method. Element analysis of an unknown sample using the relative method is usually perform by firstly irradiating known amounts of the sample and chemical standard simultaneously followed by comparing their gamma ray spectrum of the elements interest and counting under the same configuration. k_0 -standardization method is based on irradiation of a sample with a neutron flux monitor such as gold and the use of nuclear constant called k_0 - factor. This technique eliminates the need for using multi-element standards, thus is simpler than the relative method in terms of experiment but involves more complex formulae

and calculation. Absolute method is a direct analysis of the irradiated samples without using standard reference. This technique consists of absolute gamma ray measurement and direct calculation of weights or concentrations from nuclear constants.

1.2 Statement of Problem

The NAA relative method has been widely used in laboratory due to its direct, simple, and accurate elemental analysis. However, in this relative method, no detailed knowledge of the neutron flux, ϕ in the irradiation site or the nuclear data of the isotope concerned is required. The concentration of elements determined is dependent on the flux gradient in the irradiation position. Therefore, when the samples and standard have to be irradiated at different irradiation positions, the variation of the neutron flux at different irradiation position in the reactor might influences in the accuracy and precision of the analytical result. Besides, the different radial shape of sample and standard can contribute to different spatial flux distribution.

In the case of simultaneous determination of a great number of elements in one sample, the relative method requires preparation, counting and data processing of a standard for each element to be determined. It is also difficult to irradiate a large number of standards and samples together in a vial. Therefore, this will limit the samples that can be analysis by relative method.

There are possibility of instability and not homogeneity of the standard used in NAA relative method. In addition, differences in matrix composition between the sample and standard can contribute to uncertainty. All these factors can make relative NAA method becoming cumbersome, time consuming, laborious and expensive,

despite the fact that it is a very sensitive analytical method.

1.3 Purpose of Research

The aim of this research is to develop an absolute method of Neutron Activation Analysis that can be used in the laboratory of Analytical Chemistry, Malaysia Nuclear Agency (MNA). The method is based solely on the reaction rate formulations of the neutron capture processes. This absolute method requires the input of neutron reactor parameters that have to be precisely determined by experiment before the elemental masses of the irradiated samples can be computed.

1.4 Objectives of Research

The objectives of the study are:

- i. To calibrate the full energy peak efficiency of the detector for the gamma ray spectrometer used.
- ii. To characterize the reactor neutron spectrum (epithermal shape parameter α , thermal to epithermal flux ratio f , thermal and epithermal neutron flux ϕ_{th} , ϕ_{epi} .) at four selected irradiation locations at rotary rack of the TRIGA MARK II reactor.
- iii. To determine the elements concentration of certified reference materials (CRM) in order to examine the accuracy of the developed method.

1.5 Significant of Research

The expected outcome from this research is a viable approach of doing NAA which no longer rely on the use of multi standard materials that can be subjected to many errors. This research is hoping to overcome some of the drawbacks of conventional NAA method (Relative method) and able to produce reliable results that can be effectively applied for NAA analysis. Besides, a large number of elements can be determine simultaneously without the use of reference standards which can better enhance the NAA technique. Hopefully, this new approach can be used by many industries in the determination of elements in sample.

1.6 Research Scope

The scopes of the work have been defined to comprise:

- i. To calibrate the efficiencies of two detectors name Ortec detector GEM10185 detector controlled by Gamma Vision software and Canberra GC 3018 detector at different geometry.
- ii. To measure the epithermal shape parameter, α using 5 monitors (Au-Al, Zr, Zn, Co and Mo) activation method with and without cadmium cover at rotary rack facilities of 1MW TRIGA Mark II reactor at MNA.
- iii. To determine the thermal and epithermal neutron flux of the irradiation site by using gold foil activation method irradiated with and without cadmium cover.
- iv. To determine the element concentration of soil-1 and soil-7. This

sample is intended to be used as a standard reference material in quality control material for the assessment of a laboratory's analytical work.