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Structure and magnetic transition of $LaFe_{13-x}Si_x$ compounds

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Abstract

Structure and magnetic transitions were investigated by x-ray diffraction and Mössbauer spectroscopy in LaFe $_{13-x}$ Si $_x$ compounds with x=1.6, 2.0 and 2.6. With increasing Si content, the La–Fe interatomic distance decreased while the average Fe–Fe distance increased. These changes affect the structural stability and the magnetic properties of the compounds. The temperature dependence of the hyperfine field for the compound with x=2.6 can be fitted very well using a mean field model with a Brillouin function (BF) while that for the compounds with x=1.6 and 2.0 changes more sharply than that predicted by the BF relation near the Curie temperature. The different nature of the magnetic transition with different Si content originates from the spatial distribution of the Si atoms and related variation of the La–(Fe, Si) and the Fe–Fe distances in the cubic NaZn₁₃ structure.

1. Introduction

Recently, research interest on the giant magnetocaloric effect (MCE) at room temperature has been considerably enhanced. It is reported that the compounds of $Gd_5Si_2Ge_2$ [1], $La_{1-x}Ca_xMnO_3$ [2], $LaFe_{11.4}Si_{1.6}$ [3] and $MnFeP_{1-x}As_x$ [4] exhibit considerable MCE due to a first order ferromagnetic to paramagnetic (F–P) transition near the Curie temperature, T_C .

LaFe_{13-x}Si_x compounds have a cubic NaZn₁₃ structure with the space group $Fm\bar{3}c$ and a ferromagnetic ground state when $1.3 \le x \le 2.6$ [5]. It has been found that LaFe_{11.4}Si_{1.6} exhibits a giant MCE and shows a large magnetic entropy change, $|\Delta S| = 19.4$ J kg⁻¹ K⁻¹ at $T_{\rm C} = 208$ K [3]. With increasing Si content, $T_{\rm C}$ increases, but the magnetic entropy change decreases rapidly [6]. It is believed that the nature of magnetic transition near $T_{\rm C}$ changes from first order to second order. However, there is no report on why the order of magnetic transition changes with Si content in LaFe_{13-x}Si_x compounds. In this paper, we investigate

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the relationship between the structure and the magnetic transition near $T_{\rm C}$ in LaFe_{13-x}Si_x compounds. Our Mössbauer results clearly show the magnetic transition changes gradually from strongly first order to weakly first order and second order for x=1.6, 2.0 and 2.6. Powder x-ray diffraction (XRD) and Wigner–Seitz cell calculations indicate the average Fe–Fe distances increase with increasing Si content, which changes the order of the magnetic transition in LaFe_{13-x}Si_x compounds.

2. Experimental techniques

Alloys with nominal composition of LaFe_{13-x}Si_x (x = 1.6, 2.0, 2.6) were prepared in purified Ar atmosphere by a tri-arc melting method. The ingots were annealed at 1273 K for 15 days in evacuated quartz tubes. The x-ray powder diffraction analysis were performed on an automated Nicolet x-ray powder diffractometer with Cu K α radiation. The diffractometer has a Bragg–Brentano geometry and a graphite monochromator in the diffracted beam. The data analysis was carried out using *Fullprof* computer codes based on the Rietveld powder diffraction profile fitting technique [7, 8]. The Curie temperatures were determined by AC susceptibility (χ_{ac}), using a quantum design physical property measurement system (PPMS) magnetometer.

The Mössbauer spectra for LaFe_{13-x} Si_x samples were obtained in a standard transmission geometry with a 1 GBq ⁵⁷Co**Rh** source on a constant acceleration spectrometer, which was calibrated against an α -iron foil at room temperature. A liquid nitrogen flow cryostat was used to obtain temperatures between 100 and 300 K. Spectra were fitted using a standard nonlinear least-squares minimization method.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Crystal structure

Figure 1 displays the XRD patterns and Rietveld refinements for LaFe_{13-x}Si_x compounds with x = 1.6, 2.0 and 2.6. All samples show a main phase with the cubic NaZn₁₃ structure (space group: $Fm\bar{3}c$). The diffraction peaks shift to high angle with increasing Si content, indicating the reduction of the unit cell. In LaFe_{13-x}Si_x compounds, the La, 8a and Fe₁, 8b sites are fixed at (1/4, 1/4, 1/4) and (0, 0, 0), respectively. The fractional coordinates for the Fe₂, 96i sites are (0, y, z). The slight variations in the relative x-ray peak intensities (figure 1) are caused by the different Si contents and the slight changes in the fractional coordinates of the Fe₂, 96i sites.

In the La–Fe–Si ternary system, as shown below, the chemical affinity for La–Si is very strong and that for Fe–Si is moderate. The enthalpy of mixing for La–Fe is positive, which means no formation of binary La–Fe phase. In the LaFe_{13–x}Si_x alloys, the most possible impurity is La–Si phase and α -Fe. In fact, for the sample with x=1.6 (figure 1(a)), there are two weak Bragg peaks at 23.1° and 32.8°, which could originate from some La–Si phase. The most likely La–Si phase is LaSi₂ with the GdSi₂ structure (space group: *Pmma*, a=4.27 Å, b=4.17 Å and c=14.05 Å [9]). This phase has its strongest peak at 32.6° and two medium strength peaks at about 21.9° and 22.4°. Similarly, the sample with x=2.0 has a weak Bragg peak at 33° (figure 1(b)). For x=2.6, the alloy crystallizes in a single phase with the NaZn₁₃ structure (figure 1(c)). The appearance of La–Si phases induce the formation of some α -Fe in the alloys. Although no visible Bragg peaks of α -Fe are seen in the XRD patterns for x=1.6 and 2.0, the Mössbauer spectra, shown below, indicate there is a small amount (<4%) of α -Fe in the sample with x=1.6 and 2.0.

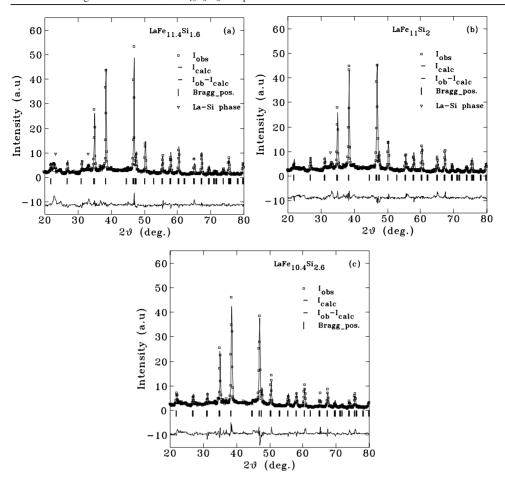


Figure 1. Rietveld fitted XRD patterns for LaFe_{13-x}Si_x compounds. (a) x = 1.6, (b) x = 2.0 and (c) x = 2.6.

It should be noted that the region related to the peaks of the La–Si phases for x=1.6 and 2.0 is excluded in the Rietveld refinement process because the peaks are too few to refine the La–Si phase. The refinement results are also listed in table 1. The lattice constant, a, decreases and the atomic position of Fe₂ changes with increasing Si content. The Si atoms only enter the 96i sites and the Fe and Si atoms are randomly distributed at the Fe₂ positions, which is in agreement with [10]. As given below, those structural changes have a critical effect on the stability and the magnetic properties of these compounds.

3.2. Magnetic properties

Figure 2 displays the temperature dependence of the AC magnetic susceptibility, χ , for LaFe_{13-x}Si_x compounds. With increasing Si content, $T_{\rm C}$ increases and the AC magnetic susceptibility change becomes less abrupt near $T_{\rm C}$.

Temperature dependent ⁵⁷Fe Mössbauer spectra for the three samples have been measured in the temperature range $100 \text{ K} \le T \le 300 \text{ K}$. The Mössbauer spectra at different temperature around their $T_{\rm C}$ for LaFe_{13-x}Si_x with x=1.6, 2.0 and 2.6 are shown in figure 3. The

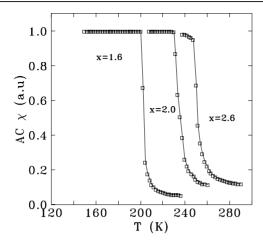


Figure 2. Temperature dependence of the AC magnetic susceptibility, χ , for LaFe_{13-x}Si_x compounds.

Table 1. Lattice parameter and the fractional coordinates of Fe₂ 96i sites for LaFe_{13-x}Si_x compounds deduced by a Rietveld powder diffraction profile-fitting technique.

	x		
	1.6	2.0	2.6
a (Å)	11.465(1)	11.461(1)	11.443(1)
X	0	0	0
у	0.1783(3)	0.1790(1)	0.1802(2)
z	0.1167(1)	0.1168(1)	0.1193(3)

temperature dependence of hyperfine field for the compounds is displayed in figure 4. The spectra for LaFe_{11.4}Si_{1.6} and LaFe₁₁Si₂ have a very small subspectrum corresponding to α -Fe (<4 at%). The formation of α -Fe is related to the appearance of the La–Si phases as discussed above.

In addition to a very small subspectrum corresponding to α -Fe, the spectrum for LaFe_{11.4}Si_{1.6} is dominated by a Gaussian magnetic sextet at temperatures, $T \leqslant 200$ K (figure 3(a)). With increasing temperature, the average hyperfine field, $B_{\rm hf}(T)$, of the sextet decreases. However, in addition to the sextet corresponding to a magnetically ordered state, there is an asymmetric doublet indicating a paramagnetic state at 202 and 205 K. The coexistence of the ferromagnetic and paramagnetic states is due to the superheating effect and is an indication of a first order transition. At 215 K, the average hyperfine field $B_{\rm hf}$ decreases to zero and the sextet component is totally replaced by the doublet, indicating that the compound is in a paramagnetic state.

The Mössbauer spectra for the LaFe $_{10.4}$ Si $_{2.6}$ compound change slowly to an asymmetric spectrum characteristic of a paramagnetic state at $T_{\rm C}$ from a Gaussian sextet of a magnetically ordered state with increasing temperature (figure 3(c)). An asymmetric doublet appears and completely replaces the magnetic sextet at 250 K. There is no sign of the coexistence of the magnetic sextet and paramagnetic doublet. Similarly, the Mössbauer spectra for LaFe $_{11}$ Si $_{2}$ change slowly from ferromagnetic sextet to paramagnetic doublet and no sign of the coexistence of the ferromagnetic and paramagnetic components.

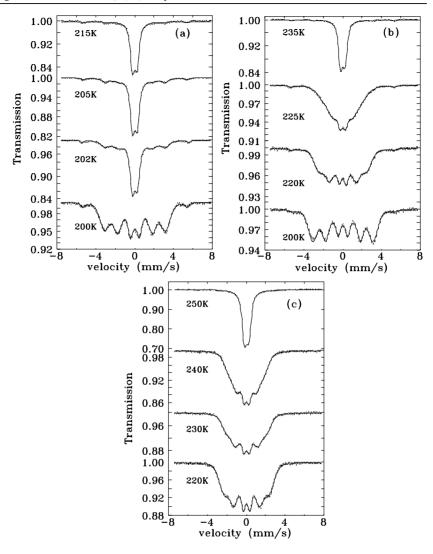


Figure 3. 57 Mössbauer spectra of LaFe_{13-x}Si_x compounds at several temperatures. (a) x=1.6, (b) x=2.0 and (c) x=2.6. The solid curves are least squares fits to the Mössbauer spectra.

There is an approximately linear correlation between the mean hyperfine field, $B_{\rm hf}(T)$, and the mean magnetic moment. The reduced magnetization, m=M(T)/M(0), and the reduced mean hyperfine field, $b_{\rm hf}=B_{\rm hf}(T)/B_{\rm hf}(0)$, follow the same temperature dependence [11]. The temperature dependence of M(T) can be determined by solving the equation $M(T)=M(0)B_J((M(T)/M(0))/(T/T_C))$ based on a mean field theory for $T\leqslant T_C$, where the function $B_J(x)=((2J+1)/2J)\coth((2J+1)x/2J)-(1/2J)\coth(x/2J)$ is the Brillouin function (BF) and the calculated M(T) is referred to as a BF relation [12]. The mean field theory predicts the magnetic transition at T_C to be second order. If the temperature dependence of M(T) obviously deviates from the BF relation near T_C , the magnetic transition should be first order. The LaFe_{13-x}Si_x compounds display critical behaviour as isotropic Heisenberg ferromagnets [5] and $B_{\rm hf}(T)$ could be thus expressed by a BF with $J=\frac{1}{2}$, as

$$B_{\rm hf}(T) = B_{\rm hf}(0)B_{1/2}(x) \tag{1}$$

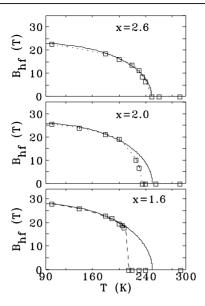


Figure 4. Temperature dependence of the hyperfine field, $B_{\rm hf}$, of LaFe_{13-x}Si_x compounds. The solid curve is calculated using mean field theory (equation (1)). The dashed curve through the experimental data points is a guide to the eye.

Table 2. Curie temperatures for LaFe_{13-x}Si_x compounds.

х	$T_{\mathrm{C}}^{\chi}(\mathrm{K})$	$T_{\rm C}^{B_{ m hf}}$ (K)	$T_{\mathrm{C}}^{\mathrm{BF}}\left(\mathrm{K}\right)$
1.6	203 ± 1	202 ± 3	250 ± 5
2.0	235 ± 1	235 ± 3	250 ± 8
2.6	249 ± 1	250 ± 3	250 ± 5

where

$$B_{1/2}(x) = 2 \coth(2x) - \coth(x), \qquad x = b_{\rm hf}/t, \qquad t = T/T_{\rm C}.$$

 $B_{\rm hf}(T)$ for LaFe_{13-x}Si_x compounds were fitted using a standard least squares method and equation (1). The results are shown in figure 4. For each pair of input values of $B_{\rm hf}(0)$ and $T_{\rm C}$, a group of data of $B_{\rm hf}(T)$ at different temperatures, T, can be obtained by solving equation (1) numerically. Two fitted parameters of $B_{\rm hf}(0)$ and $T_{\rm C}^{\rm BF}$ can be derived from the calculated $B_{\rm hf}(T)$ and corresponding experimental data by a standard least squares method. The mean field theory may fail as the temperature approaches $T_{\rm C}$. In the fitting process, the measured data far below $T_{\rm C}$ are used first and the other points are gradually added unless they significantly increase the error. The uncertainties for fitted parameters of $B_{\rm hf}(0)$ and $T_{\rm C}^{\rm BF}$ depend on the number of points used in the fitting process and their measurement errors (table 2).

 $B_{\rm hf}(T)$ for LaFe_{10.4}Si_{2.6} can be fitted very well using the BF relation. However, with increasing temperature, $B_{\rm hf}(T)$ changes more sharply than that predicted by the BF relation near $T_{\rm C}$ for the LaFe_{11.4}Si_{1.6} compound. This behaviour confirmed that a first order F–P transition occurs in LaFe_{11.4}Si_{1.6} and a second order one in the LaFe_{10.4}Si_{2.6} compound, in agreement with the magnetic measurement results [13]. This is also the main reason that LaFe_{11.4}Si_{1.6} has a much larger magnetic entropy change near $T_{\rm C}$. The temperature dependence of $B_{\rm hf}(T)$ for LaFe_{11.4}Si₂ deviates from the BF relation, but not as sharply as that for the LaFe_{11.4}Si_{1.6} compound, indicating a weak first order magnetic transition at $T_{\rm C}$. The results

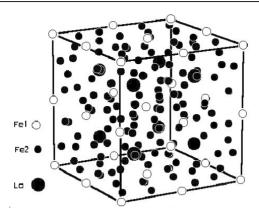


Figure 5. Crystallographic unit cell for LaFe_{13-x}Si_x compounds. The sites of La (8a), Fe₁ (8b) and Fe₂ (96i) are occupied by the atoms of La, Fe and Fe (and/or Si), respectively.

are also in agreement with the fact that the AC magnetic susceptibility change becomes much sharper near $T_{\rm C}$ with decreasing Si content (figure 2).

The fitted values of magnetic transition temperature $T_{\rm C}^{\rm BF}$ are listed in table 2 together with the $T_{\rm C}^{B_{\rm hf}}$ values determined from the appearance of the doublet and/or the disappearance of the sextet. Transition temperatures, $T_{\rm C}^{\rm X}$, obtained from $\chi_{\rm ac}$ measurements are identical, within error, to $T_{\rm C}^{B_{\rm hf}}$. However, for the alloys with x=1.6 and 2.0, $T_{\rm C}^{B_{\rm hf}}$ is smaller than $T_{\rm C}^{\rm BF}$ due to the fact that $B_{\rm hf}(T)$ changes more sharply than predicted by the BF relation near $T_{\rm C}$.

It is interesting to note that the fitted magnetic transition temperature, $T_{\rm C}^{\rm BF}$, is the same (about 250 K) for all three compounds. The compounds of La(Fe, Al)₁₃ with the NaZn₁₃ structure also have a maximum Curie temperature of 250 K [14].

3.3. Relationship between structure and magnetic phase transition

In order to understand the relationship between structure and magnetic properties, a Wigner–Seitz cell analysis was done on all the compounds. The Wigner–Seitz cell reflects the site symmetry and volume as well as the number and type of near neighbours and the interatomic distances [15]. The Wigner–Seitz cell calculation was performed following the method described in [15].

Figure 5 displays the unit cell for the LaFe_{13-x}Si_x compound. As stated above, the sites of La (8a), Fe₁ (8b) and Fe₂ (96i) are occupied by the atoms of La, Fe and Fe (and/or Si), respectively. The interatomic distances between the near neighbours, La–Fe₂, Fe₁–Fe₂ and Fe₂–Fe₂, are directly derived from Wigner–Seitz calculations (figure 6). The interatomic distances are determined by the unit cell dimension and the atomic fractional coordinates. In addition, the average Fe₂–Fe₂ distance is calculated by the weighted average of all Fe₂–Fe₂ interatomic distances (figure 6). Similarly, the weighted average of Fe–Fe distances is obtained using all Fe₁–Fe₂ and Fe₂–Fe₂ interatomic distances (figure 7).

The Wigner–Seitz analysis shows that the La atom (8a) has 24 near neighbours of Fe₂ (Fe or Si) atoms (96i), but no near neighbours of Fe₁ atoms (8b) (figure 5). With increasing Si content, the La–Fe₂ distance decreases, indicating strengthening the La–Fe₂ bond (figure 6). An estimate for the affinity of one element to the other can be obtained from the empirical calculation of the enthalpy of mixing as proposed by Miedema [16]. The enthalpy of mixing gives a measure of the relative bond strengths of La–(Si, Fe) and Fe–Si. The enthalpy of mixing

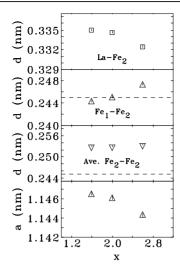


Figure 6. Interatomic distances, d, derived from the Wigner–Seitz calculation and lattice parameter, a, in LaFe_{13-x}Si_x compounds. The average Fe₂–Fe₂ distance means the weighted average of all Fe₂–Fe₂ nearest-neighbour distances. The dashed line indicates the position of the critical Fe–Fe distance (2.45 Å).

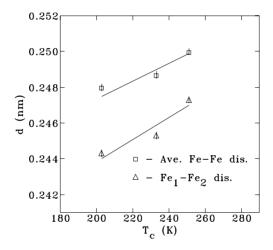


Figure 7. Relationship between $T_{\rm C}$ and Fe–Fe interatomic distance in LaFe_{13-x}Si_x compounds. The average Fe–Fe distance means the weighted average value of all Fe₁–Fe₂ and Fe₂–Fe₂ nearest-neighbour distances.

for La–Si $(-58 \text{ kJ mol}^{-1})$ is much larger and more negative than that for Fe–Si $(-34 \text{ kJ mol}^{-1})$. However, the enthalpy of mixing for La–Fe is positive $(+19 \text{ kJ mol}^{-1})$. It is for just this reason that the binary compound, LaFe₁₃, does not exist, while LaFe_{13-x}Si_x compounds are stable with $x \ge 1.3$. This also explains why the Si atoms only enter the 96i sites and the La–Fe₂ bond length decreases with increasing Si content.

The strong La–Si bonds play an important role in the structure of LaFe $_{13-x}$ Si $_x$ compounds. The La atom and its near neighbours (24Fe $_2$) constitute a strong structural cluster La(Fe, Si) $_{24}$, which determines the stability of the cubic NaZn $_{13}$ structure. The replacement of some La–Fe pairs by La–Si pairs can stabilize this cluster and thus maintain the NaZn $_{13}$ structure. However,

a further increase in Si content will destroy the cubic structure. As mentioned above, the Si and Fe atoms are randomly distributed at 96i sites with the same fractional coordinates in the cubic $LaFe_{13-x}Si_x$ compound. However, the large difference in affinity between La-Si and La-Fe pairs will introduce changes in the interatomic distances of the pairs and the structural stability of the cluster will be lowered. Indeed, the compound of $LaFe_9Si_4$ possesses a tetragonal structure which can be derived from the $NaZn_{13}$ structure [17]. In this compound, the 96i site is split into three inequivalent sites, i.e., 16l(1), 16k and 16l(2). Si atoms occupy the 16l(2) positions. The tetragonal structure corresponds to an ordered occupation of Si atoms and possesses a paramagnetic ground state [18].

The Fe₂ atom has nine near neighbours of Fe₂ in addition to two neighbours of La and one neighbour of Fe₁. The average interatomic distance of Fe₂–Fe₂ is slightly larger than that of Fe₁–Fe₂ and remains almost unchanged (about 2.53 Å) with increasing Si content (figure 6).

It is interesting to note that the Fe₁–Fe₂ distance is increased while the lattice constant is decreased with increasing Si content (figure 6). The Fe₁ is surrounded by 12 near neighbours of Fe₂ (Fe or Si) atoms at the vertices of a regular icosahedron. The icosahedral (Fe₁-Fe₂)₁₃ can be considered as a superatom (figure 5). In this picture, the basis for the cubic NaZn₁₃ type structure can be described as a La atom and a (Fe₁-Fe₂)₁₃ superatom. The La is nonmagnetic and the magnetic contribution is mainly from the superatoms. According to Givord and Lemaire [19], there are two Fe–Fe exchange interactions in R₂Fe₁₇ compounds, positive and negative. When the separation of the Fe-Fe pair is smaller than 2.45 Å the exchange interaction is negative while the interaction is positive at larger Fe-Fe distances. For the LaFe_{13-x}Si_x compounds, the radius of the $(Fe_1-Fe_2)_{13}$ icosahedron, i.e. Fe_1-Fe_2 atomic distance, is 2.443, 2.450 and 2.473 Å for x = 1.6, 2.0 and 2.6, respectively. On the other hand, the average Fe₂-Fe₂ distance remains almost unchanged (about 2.53 Å) and is larger than the critical distance of 2.45 Å in LaFe_{13-x}Si_x compounds. The Fe₁-Fe₂ distance plays the critical role in the exchange interaction and $T_{\rm C}$ in LaFe_{13-x}Si_x compounds. With increasing Si content, the Fe₁-Fe₂ distance increases, which enhances the positive exchange interaction in the $(Fe_1-Fe_2)_{13}$ cluster and thus increases T_C . Figure 7 shows the relationship between the Fe-Fe interatomic distance and T_C in LaFe_{13-x}Si_x compounds. The figure clearly shows the good correlation between T_C and the Fe₁-Fe₂ distance and the weighted average of Fe-Fe distance. Similar results have been reported in other R-Fe compounds [20].

The nature of the P–F magnetic transition at $T_{\rm C}$ in LaFe_{13-x}Si_x compounds is intimately related to the coupling between the lattice and magnetism. The Fe₁–Fe₂ distance for the compounds with x=1.6 and 2.0 is near the critical boundary of negative and positive exchange interactions while that for x=2.6 is larger than 2.45 Å. However, the large magnetovolume effect, resulting from the coupling between the lattice and magnetism, can increase the Fe₁–Fe₂ distance markedly and enhance the positive interaction in the superatom (Fe₁–Fe₂)₁₃. In fact, LaFe_{11.4}Si_{1.6} has a large negative lattice expansion up to 0.4% between the paramagnetic and ferromagnetic states near $T_{\rm C}$, but that for LaFe_{10.4}Si_{2.6} is less than 0.05% [3]. This conforms to the fact that LaFe_{11.4}Si_{1.6} shows a strong first order magnetic transition at $T_{\rm C}$ while the transition is second order for the LaFe_{10.4}Si_{2.6} compound. Clearly, the different order of the magnetic transition for compounds with different Si content originates from the variation of the La–(Fe, Si) and the average Fe–Fe near neighbour distances, particularly that of Fe₁–Fe₂.

4. Conclusion

Room temperature XRD analysis indicates the lattice constant decreases with increasing Si content. Wigner–Seitz cell calculations show that the La (8a)–Fe₂ (96i) interatomic distance decreases while that of Fe₁ (8b)–Fe₂ (96i) increases with Si content. The average Fe₂–Fe₂

distance remains almost unchanged and the average Fe–Fe distance increases with Si content. The replacement of some La–Fe pairs by La–Si pairs can improve the structural stability of the cubic LaFe_{13-x}Si_x compound according to Miedema's model. The larger Fe–Fe atomic distance in LaFe_{13-x}Si_x compounds enhances the positive exchange interaction, which conforms to the fact that the $T_{\rm C}$ increases with Si content. Analysis of the temperature dependence of the hyperfine fields indicates that a first order magnetic transition occurs in the compounds with x = 1.6 and 2.0 and a second order one in the LaFe_{10.4}Si_{2.6} compound.

The nature of the magnetic transition for $LaFe_{13-x}Si_x$ compounds at T_C is intimately related to the magnetovolume effect. The different order of the magnetic transition for compounds with different Si content originates from the spatial distribution of the Si atoms and related variation of interatomic distance of La–(Fe, Si) and Fe–Fe in the NaZn₁₃ cubic structure.

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