

59.9 mV·dec⁻¹ Subthreshold Swing Achieved in Zinc Tin Oxide TFTs with *in situ* Atomic Layer Deposited Al₂O₃ Gate Insulator

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Abstract— Here, by depositing both the zinc tin oxide (ZTO) channel and Al₂O₃ gate dielectric layer using atomic layer deposition (ALD) without breaking vacuum, we made TFTs with a steep subthreshold swing (SS) of 59.9 mV·dec⁻¹, near the room temperature Boltzmann limit. An extremely low interface trap density of $9.59 \times 10^9 \text{ cm}^{-2}\text{eV}^{-1}$ was extracted from the measured SS value, and was corroborated by the high-low frequency capacitance method. Comparison with other TFT processes shows that both the higher-*k* gate dielectric and the *in situ* ALD process are required to obtain the low SS value. The device made with *in situ* dielectric deposition exhibits a maximum linear mobility of $19.2 \text{ cm}^2\text{V}^{-1}\text{s}^{-1}$, an ON/OFF current ratio $> 10^8$, and a threshold voltage of 1.3 V. The sharp SS achieved here will enable low voltage electronics using this scalable ALD technology.

Index Terms—Amorphous semiconductors, semiconductor-insulator interfaces, thin film transistors

I. INTRODUCTION

OVER the past several decades, thin film transistor (TFT) development has been driven by the requirements of modern display technology. While today's high definition, high frame rate displays are enabled by amorphous metal oxide semiconductors (AOS) TFTs, AOS also have great potential for back-end-of-line (BEOL) 3D monolithic integration and flexible electronics [1]–[3]. There have been many studies of different AOS materials, such as In₂O₃ [4], InGaZnO (IGZO) [5]–[7], InZnO (IZO) [8], InGaSnO (IGTO) [9], and ZnSnO (ZTO) [2], [3], [10]. However, IGZO, IZO, and IGTO all contain indium, which is comparatively rare [11]. ZTO, in contrast, is made of common elements and has demonstrated excellent electron transport [2], [12]. ZTO can be deposited by many common process techniques including magnetron sputtering [13], solution processing [3], [14], pulsed laser

This work was supported by National Science Foundation Scalable Nanomanufacturing award #1727918 and National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship Program. Any opinion, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of NSF. Portions of this work were performed in the Lurie Nanofabrication Facility, which is supported by the University of Michigan College of Engineering.

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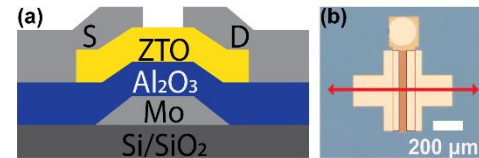


Fig. 1. (a) *in situ* ALD Al₂O₃ ZTO TFT device cross-section. (b) Optical image of the top-down view of a 500 × 500 μm ZTO TFT device.

deposition [15], [16], and atomic layer deposition (ALD) [2], [17], [18]. Our group has developed a BEOL-compatible ALD process to deposit ZTO thin films for n-type TFTs with mobility as high as $22.1 \text{ cm}^2\text{V}^{-1}\text{s}^{-1}$ [2]. As future implementation of thin film circuitry requires energy-efficient, low-voltage switching, it is crucial to lower the subthreshold swing (SS) [3], [19]. In previous studies of ZTO TFTs, the lowest SS reported was $70 \text{ mV}\cdot\text{dec}^{-1}$, achieved by solution processing using HfO₂ as the gate dielectric [20]. Given that the Boltzmann limit of SS at room temperature is $\sim 60 \text{ mV}\cdot\text{dec}^{-1}$, there is still potential to improve the SS in combination with adopting more scalable ZTO deposition technologies, such as ALD. The device community has explored various techniques to lower the SS, including tunneling FET architectures [21], incorporating a charge trapping layer [22], or using a negative capacitance (e.g. ferroelectric) gate material [23]. However, the adoption of these techniques in oxide TFTs faces significant challenges such as non-standard material integration or complex processes.

In this work, we demonstrate a facile *in situ* process for ALD of the ZTO semiconductor and Al₂O₃ gate dielectric without breaking vacuum. The fabricated bottom-gate, top-contact TFTs operate using standard transistor physics and materials, and exhibit a high mobility and low threshold voltage. By minimizing the density of interface defects through the *in situ* process, we achieved a room temperature subthreshold swing value of $59.9 \text{ mV}\cdot\text{dec}^{-1}$ using a BEOL-compatible process.

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II. EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURE

Bottom-gate, top-contact TFTs with channel width (W) of 500 μm and length (L) of 50 μm were fabricated. A schematic cross-section is shown in **Fig. 1(a)**. First, a heavily-doped silicon wafer with a 100 nm thermally-grown SiO₂ film was used as the substrate. To create the patterned gate electrode, approximately 100 nm of molybdenum (Mo) was sputtered onto the substrate and then patterned by XeF₂ etching. Then, approximately 30 nm Al₂O₃ was deposited for the gate insulator using an O₃-based ALD process at 200°C. Next, without breaking vacuum, approximately 11 nm of ZTO with a Sn content of 21 at. % was deposited by ALD at 200°C using a hybrid process for the active layer. The hybrid process uses H₂O as the oxidant following the Zn precursor, and O₂ plasma as the oxidant after the Sn precursor [2]. The ZTO film was then wet etched for device isolation before being annealed in a moisture-controlled glovebox for one hour at 400°C in air with relative humidity < 20% [24]. Next, a via opening in the gate insulator was created by wet etch to allow probing of the gate electrode. Finally, approximately 100 nm of Mo was deposited by sputtering and patterned by lift-off to form the source and drain electrodes. The final fabricated device is shown in **Fig. 1(b)**. The devices were aged for > 6 months in air ambient to stabilize their performance [25]. Electrical measurements were taken in the dark at room temperature in air ambient using a HP4156A semiconductor parameter analyzer.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The transfer characteristics (I_D - V_{GS}) of an *in situ* ZTO TFT are shown in **Fig. 2(a)**. There is a hysteresis of around 61 mV. The ALD Al₂O₃ gate dielectric has a low leakage current density of 2.44×10^{-9} A/cm² at V_{GS} of +5 V, which is limited by measurement noise. Using metal-insulator-metal capacitors, a minimum breakdown voltage of 23.5 V was obtained, which corresponds to an applied electric field of 7.83 MV/cm. **Fig. 2(b)** shows the extracted SS value based on the experimental data. The SS of the forward sweep is 59.9 mV·dec⁻¹, while the SS of the reverse sweep is 61.7 mV·dec⁻¹. Since these values are nearly the same, we conclude that the low SS value is due to the ultra-clean interface between the *in situ* ALD Al₂O₃ and ALD ZTO. From six measured devices, the average minimum SS is 60.1 mV·dec⁻¹ with a standard deviation of 0.3 mV·dec⁻¹. This is the lowest SS ever reported for ZTO TFTs.

The maximum linear mobility measured is $19.2 \text{ cm}^2\text{V}^{-1}\text{s}^{-1}$ (**Fig. 2(c)**) at a gate voltage of 3.9 V, which was extracted using the method reported in [2]. This linear mobility value is in good agreement with the extracted saturation mobility of $15.6 \text{ cm}^2\text{V}^{-1}\text{s}^{-1}$. The high electron mobility is achieved through deposition of a dense ZTO film obtained by high-quality ALD growth combined with post-deposition annealing, as described in [2]. The measured threshold voltage is 1.3 V, obtained from the forward sweep. In **Fig. 2(a)**, the drain current reached $0.30 \text{ mA}\cdot\text{mm}^{-1}$, while the off current is $< 4 \times 10^{-11} \text{ mA}\cdot\text{mm}^{-1}$, which brings the ON/OFF current ratio $> 10^8$.

A density of interface states, D_{it} , value of $9.59 \times 10^9 \text{ cm}^{-2}\text{eV}^{-1}$ was calculated directly from the measured SS , using (1):

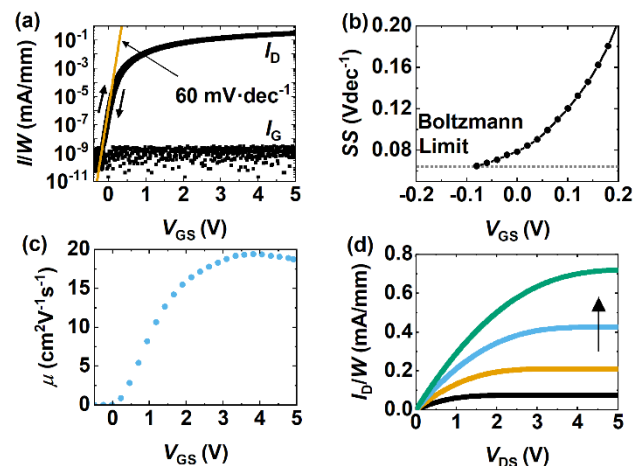


Fig. 2. Electrical characteristics of *in situ* ZTO TFT. (a) Transfer characteristic at a drain-source voltage (V_{DS}) of 1 V, where V_{GS} is the gate-source voltage with V_{GS} step of 20 mV, the drain current is I_D , the gate leakage current is I_G , and the fitted line indicates a SS value of 60 mV·dec⁻¹ from the forward sweep. (b) SS and (c) linear mobility (μ) as a function of V_{GS} , extracted from the forward sweep data in (a). (d) Output characteristics for $V_{GS} = 2, 3, 4$, and 5 V.

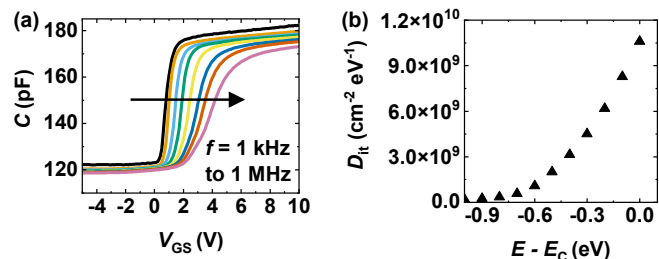


Fig. 3. (a) Measured C-V data for the *in situ* ZTO TFT. (b) Density of interface states (D_{it}), extracted using the high-low frequency method, as a function of position in the bandgap.

$$D_{it} = \frac{C_{ox}}{qWL} \left(\frac{SS}{kT \ln 10} - 1 \right). \quad (1)$$

Here, we used a C_{ox} value of $2.12 \times 10^{-7} \text{ F}\cdot\text{cm}^{-2}$. This capacitive density, which corresponds to a relative dielectric constant of 7.2, was measured using metal-insulator-metal structures (Mo/Al₂O₃/Mo). To corroborate this D_{it} value, capacitance-voltage (C - V) sweeps were performed over a frequency range of 1 kHz to 1 MHz (**Fig. 3(a)**). D_{it} as a function of position within the bandgap (**Fig. 3(b)**) was calculated using the high-low frequency analysis method [26]. The observed D_{it} value of $1.06 \times 10^{10} \text{ cm}^{-2}\text{eV}^{-1}$ near the edge of the conduction band is in good agreement with the D_{it} value obtained from SS .

To further clarify the importance of the *in situ* gate dielectric/semiconductor ALD process, we compared two other TFTs fabricated during previous process characterization. The first (**Fig. 4(a)**) uses a blanket layer of 100 nm Mo as the bottom gate and 30 nm of Al₂O₃ deposited with the same O₃ ALD process as the gate insulator. The second (**Fig. 4(b)**) uses a heavily-doped Si wafer as the bottom gate and 100 nm thermally-grown SiO₂ layer as the gate dielectric. The ZTO layer is deposited *ex situ* for both samples, i.e., vacuum is broken after the gate insulator deposition and the surface is exposed to atmosphere before active layer deposition. The ZTO layer for both *ex situ* devices was deposited at 150°C, rather

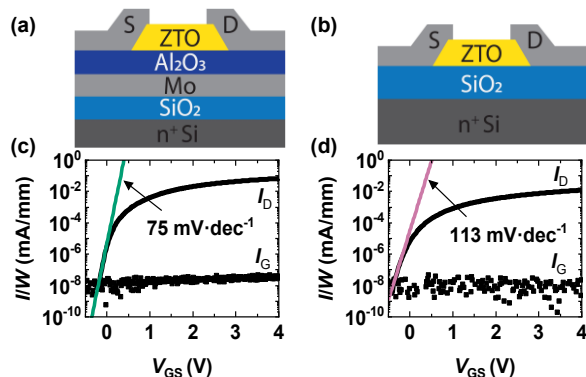


Fig. 4. Two other TFTs, shown for comparison. (a) Cross-sectional schematic and (c) transfer characteristics of *ex situ* Al₂O₃ TFT with V_{GS} step of 20 mV; (b) Cross-sectional schematic and (d) transfer characteristics of *ex situ* SiO₂ TFT with V_{GS} step of 20 mV.

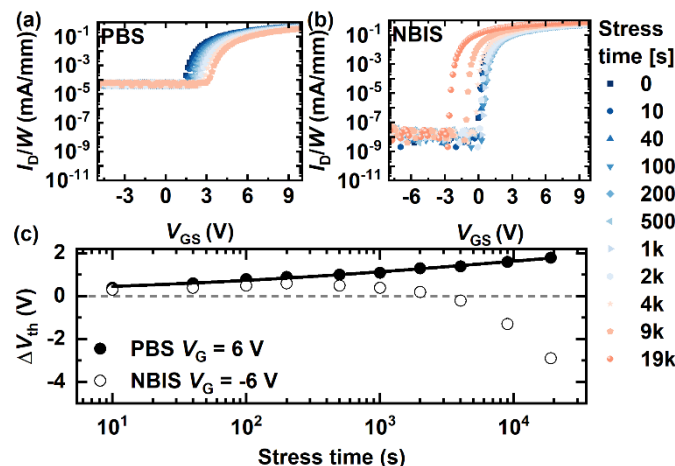


Fig. 5. Transfer characteristics during (a) PBS test (gate stress voltage of +6 V) and (b) NBIS test (gate stress voltage of -6 V). During stress, both the source and drain electrodes were grounded. In the transfer curve measurements for both (a) and (b), $V_{DS} = 1$ V and V_{GS} was swept with a step of 150 mV. (c) ΔV_{th} for PBS and NBIS, plotted against stress time. Measured data are indicated by symbols. The solid line indicates a fit to the PBS data using the stretched exponential function with fitting parameters of $\Delta V_{th0} = 2.6$ V, $\tau = 9697$ s, and $\beta = 0.24$. The large off current compared to Fig. 2a and change in off current floor in (a) and (b) are due to differing measurements conditions.

than at 200°C, which was used for the *in situ* TFT to achieve higher TFT mobility. The post-deposition anneal conditions were identical to those used for the *in situ* sample. Based on our previous study [2], we do not expect the change in ZTO process temperature to affect the SS value.

The *ex situ* Al₂O₃ gate insulator TFT yields a SS of 75.3 mV·dec⁻¹ (Fig. 4(c)) and D_{it} (extracted using (1)) of 3.66×10^{11} cm⁻² eV⁻¹. The *ex situ* SiO₂ gate insulator TFTs yield a SS of 113 mV·dec⁻¹ (Fig. 4(d)) and extracted D_{it} of 1.9×10^{11} cm⁻² eV⁻¹. Compared to the *in situ* Al₂O₃ gate insulator, the comparison samples have D_{it} values that are a factor of 20 to 40 higher. We note that by replacing the low- k thermal SiO₂ gate insulator with a higher- k *ex situ* Al₂O₃ layer, the device SS is reduced due to the increased capacitive coupling, however D_{it} increased slightly. In contrast, the *in situ* ALD deposition process, in which the surface of Al₂O₃ is kept in vacuum and is not exposed to ambient air before ZTO

TABLE I
COMPARISON WITH OTHER BEOL-COMPATIBLE TFTS

Semiconductor Material & Deposition Method	Gate Insulator	SS [mV·dec ⁻¹]	Ref.
ALD ZTO	<i>in situ</i> O ₃ -based ALD Al ₂ O ₃	59.9	This Work
	<i>ex situ</i> O ₃ -based ALD Al ₂ O ₃	75.3	This Work
	Thermal SiO ₂	113	This Work
Solution-processed ZTO	AlO _x	96	[27]
	HfO ₂	70	[20]
RF Sputtered IGZO	HfO ₂	70	[28]
	Al _x O _y	68	[29]
	SiO ₂ /HfO ₂	96	[30]
Exfoliated MoS ₂	HfO ₂	74	[31]
	Y ₂ O ₃ /HfO ₂	65	[32]

deposition, dramatically reduces the D_{it} . This leads to an SS of 59.9 mV·dec⁻¹, which is very close to the theoretical Boltzmann limit at room temperature (Fig. 2(b)).

Positive bias stress (PBS) and negative bias illumination stress (NBIS) tests were done to assess device stability (Fig. 5). For PBS, the positive shift in threshold voltage, ΔV_{th} versus stress time was fit to the stretched exponential function $\Delta V_{th} = \Delta V_{th0} \{1 - \exp[-(t/\tau)^\beta]\}$, where ΔV_{th0} is the ΔV_{th} at infinite time, τ is the trapping time of carriers, and β is the stretched-exponential exponent [33]. This model is based on the hypothesis that trapped charges redistribute into deep states within the dielectric during stress. For our data, $\Delta V_{th0} = 2.6$ V, $\tau = 9697$ s, and $\beta = 0.24$, within the expected range [33], [34].

For NBIS, a green LED (520 nm) with a power density of 957 μ W/cm² was used. The NBIS data in Fig. 5(b) shows a negative V_{th} shift as stress progresses. The NBIS shifts, which have been observed previously for amorphous oxides, are typically attributed to ionization of oxygen vacancies, leading to an increase in donor-like states [34].

When compared to other reports (Table I), the *in situ* ZTO TFTs demonstrated here have the lowest SS value of all BEOL-compatible TFTs made using non-steep slope transistor architectures. Moreover, the *in situ* ALD process demonstrated here allows BEOL 3D monolithic integration of low voltage thin film electronics within a low thermal budget, using standard process modules.

IV. CONCLUSION

In this work, bottom-gate, top-contact n-TFTs were fabricated using an *in situ* ALD Al₂O₃ and ALD ZTO process without breaking vacuum. The TFTs exhibit a high linear mobility of 19.2 cm²V⁻¹s⁻¹, a low threshold voltage of 1.3 V, and an ON/OFF current ratio greater than 10⁸. By using an *in situ* O₃-based ALD Al₂O₃ gate insulator with a low interface defect density, we achieved a SS of 59.9 mV·dec⁻¹, the steepest SS reported to date for BEOL-compatible TFTs, and very close to the theoretical Boltzmann limit at room temperature. This low SS ZTO TFT fabrication process paves the way for future BEOL-compatible, low-voltage TFT technologies to support 3D monolithic integration.

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