Suppression of current collapse in insulated gate AlGaN/GaN heterostructure field-effect transistors using ultrathin Al$_2$O$_3$ dielectric

Tamotsu Hashizume, Shinya Ootomo, and Hideki Hasegawa

Research Center for Integrated Quantum Electronics (RCIQE), Hokkaido University, Sapporo, 060-8628, Japan

(Received 20 May 2003; accepted 12 August 2003)

We investigated effects of electronic states at free surfaces of AlGaN/GaN heterostructure field-effect transistors (HFETs) on the inner current transport at the heterointerfaces. The analysis on transient currents for the air-exposed and H$_2$-plasma-treated devices showed that N-vacancy-related near-surface traps play an important role in current collapse in AlGaN/GaN HFETs. An Al$_2$O$_3$-based surface passivation scheme including an N$_2$-plasma surface treatment was proposed and applied to an insulated-gate HFET. A large conduction-band offset of 2.1 eV was achieved at the Al$_2$O$_3$/Al$_0.3$Ga$_{0.7}$N interface. No current collapse was observed in the fabricated Al$_2$O$_3$ insulated-gate HFETs under both drain stress and gate stress.

© 2003 American Institute of Physics

Although significant progress has been achieved in the GaN-based high-power/high-frequency electronic devices, surface-related problems still need an immediate solution. In particular, so-called current collapse effects not only degrade microwave output performance but also impede reliable operation of the GaN-based power devices. The current collapse phenomena have often been observed in Schottky-gate AlGaN/GaN heterostructure field-effect transistors (SG HFETs) under both gate stress and drain stress. Some models based on the electron trapping by surface states have been proposed. However, the mechanism for the current collapse is not clarified as yet.

In this letter, we report on passivation effects of the Al$_2$O$_3$-based insulated-gate (IG) structure on current collapse in AlGaN/GaN HFETs. Although Si$_N$$_x$ films have been used to mitigate the surface problems on the GaN-based devices, it can be argued that their band gap ($E_G$=~5 eV) and dielectric constant ($\varepsilon$=7) are not suitable for utilization as a gate barrier to Al$_x$Ga$_{1-x}$N (e.g., $E_G$=4.1 eV and $\varepsilon$=9 for $x$=0.3). In this aspect, Al$_2$O$_3$ has an advantage over Si$_N$$_x$ for the application to IG-type AlGaN/GaN HFETs, due to its larger band gap and higher dielectric constant. For understanding the collapse mechanism and optimizing passivation process, the dynamic response of surface states was investigated in terms of transient currents in gateless HFETs.

The AlGaN/GaN heterostructures used in the present study are schematically shown in Fig. 1. The structure consists of undoped GaN, undoped Al$_x$Ga$_{1-x}$N, Si-doped Al$_x$Ga$_{1-x}$N, and undoped Al$_x$Ga$_{1-x}$N layers, all grown by metalorganic vapor phase epitaxy on c-plane sapphire or 6H-SiC substrate. The Al content $x$ ranged from 0.28 to 0.30. Typical values of the electron concentration and mobility of the samples at room temperature were $1.1 \times 10^{13}$ cm$^{-2}$ and 900 cm$^2$/V s, respectively. As an ohmic contact, a Ti/Al/Ti/Au layered structure was formed on the surface of GaN/AlGaN, followed by annealing in N$_2$ at 800°C for 2 min.

A gateless HFET structure with a drain-source spacing of 4 $\mu$m, shown in Fig. 1(a), was prepared to investigate the correlation between the surface electronic states and inner current transport. The device with air-exposed surface, a similar transient with a rather small amplitude was observed. In addition, both de-
vices showed an increase in transient amplitude with the drain stress. On the other hand, no transient was observed in current for the N$_2$-plasma-treated device and the Al$_2$O$_3$-passivated device. If thermal effects are dominant for the current transients, then all gateless devices would show almost the same transient behavior in drain currents, independent of surface treatments. However, the present results indicated that the current transients seem to be caused by trapping and detrapping of electrons by surface states, thereby reflecting the difference in surface electronic properties.

Figure 3 shows measured temperature dependence of the time constant of the initial fast transient as a function of the inverse temperature. The same Arrhenius-type temperature dependence with an activation energy $\Delta E$ of 0.37 eV was obtained for the air-exposed and H$_2$-plasma-treated devices. Note that the activation energy was calculated by taking into account the temperature correction factors. Thus, a deep level with the signature plot shown in Fig. 3 plays a dominant role in the transient in drain currents. Mizutani et al.\textsuperscript{10} have very recently detected a similar surface trap in AlGaN/GaN HFETs from low-frequency noise measurement. On the other hand, slow and nonexponential response seems to be typical of electron emission from a surface state continuum that includes a wide range of time constants.

A detailed x-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) analysis showed that a serious depletion of N atoms was found at the AlGaN surfaces for the samples with the H$_2$-plasma treatment. During the process, highly active hydrogen radicals can react with the AlGaN surface to form volatile NH$_x$ products. For the air-exposed device, it is expected that natural oxidation leads to escape of N atoms in the NO$_x$ form as well as partial formation of Al oxide and Ga oxide. Such surface reactions will introduce N vacancy and related defects in the near-surface region of AlGaN. Thus, the most likely candidate for the observed 0.37 eV deep level seems to be N vacancy, or a complex related to N vacancy. Such near-surface trap and surface states could be filled with electrons injected from the channel during the application of a large drain stress. This could form a “virtual gate” with a negative charge at the free AlGaN surface.\textsuperscript{11} After switching the drain voltage to the quiescent bias of 0.5 V, the emission of the trapped electrons from the surface electronic states resulted in the transient in the drain current, as shown in Fig. 2.

No depletion of N atoms was observed on the N$_2$-plasma-treated AlGaN surface. This is consistent with the finding that the gateless HFETs with the N$_2$-plasma treatment showed no current transient. It is likely that the present ECR N$_2$-plasma treatment partially recovers or terminates the N-vacancy-related surface defects, leading to reduction of surface-defect traps and surface states on AlGaN.\textsuperscript{9} For practical surface passivation of devices, however, one needs a protective layer against chemical reaction or charge transfer. Thus, we have developed a surface passivation scheme with a combination of ECR N$_2$-plasma treatment and formation of thin Al$_2$O$_3$ layer, and applied it to the IG HFET shown in Fig. 1(b).

Figure 4(a) shows the XPS valence-band spectra of the AlGaN surface before and after the passivation and (b) band alignment at the Al$_2$O$_3$/AlGaN interface.
showed pronounced drain-stress-dependent current collapse, respectively. As shown in Fig. 5, the solid lines, open circles and dotted lines correspond to the statical and pulsed mode gate sweeps with the initial drain stress V_{DS0} of 30, 20, and 10 V, respectively. As shown in Fig. 5(a), the SG HFET showed pronounced drain-stress-dependent current collapse, very similar to the reported data. This can be explained by the electron injection into surface states under high drain voltages, as mentioned earlier. On the other hand, all the I–V sweeps traced the same line at the given gate voltage for the Al2O3 IG HFET, as shown in Fig. 5(b), indicating the significant effects of the present Al2O3-based passivation structure.

As one of the methods of investigating manifestation of current collapse or rf dispersion under gate stress, we compared pulsed mode I–V characteristics between conventional Ni SG and Al2O3 IG HFETs. The result is shown in Fig. 6. In the dc mode, a sweep of the gate voltage was made statically from −8 to +1 V with a sweeping rate of 0.05 V/s. In the pulse-mode measurements, on the other hand, we set −8 V for the base line of the gate pulse form. The gate voltage was then increased to +1 V with a pulse width of 0.5 ms and a 5% duty cycle, as indicated in the inset of Fig. 6.

As shown in Fig. 6(b), large differences in drain currents between the dc- and pulse-mode methods were observed for the Ni SG HFETs. The gate stress induced electron injection into surface states in the region between gate and drain, causing the virtual gating effects on the AlGaN surface. The serious gate leakage currents observed in the SG HFETs can assist such electron injection. Even after increasing gate voltage in the pulse form, this virtual gating effects continue and reduce the two-dimensional electron gas density due to the base line of −8 V, causing a serious current collapse. As shown in Fig. 6(b), on the other hand, no current collapse was observed for the Al2O3 IG HFET. This effect was observed in the fabricated Al2O3 IG HFETs under both drain stress and gate stress, indicating a remarkable advantage of the Al2O3-based passivation structure.

In summary, the analysis on the transient currents in the gateless AlGaN/GaN HFETs showed that the N-vacancy-related near-surface trap is one of the possible origins for current collapse. To suppress the current collapse, the Al2O3-based surface passivation scheme including the N2-plasma treatment was applied to the insulated-gate type GaN/AlGaN HFET. No current collapse was observed in the fabricated Al2O3 IG HFETs under both drain stress and gate stress, indicating a remarkable advantage of the Al2O3-based passivation for reliability improvement of AlGaN/GaN HFETs.

This work was partly supported by 21C COE Project on “Meme-Media Based Next Generation ITs” and grant-in-aid for Scientific Research (B) (No. 14350155) from the Ministry of Science, Education, Sports, and Culture, Japan.

FIG. 5. Drain I–V characteristics of the fabricated Ni SG and Al2O3 IG HFETs under various drain-stress voltages.

FIG. 6. I_{DS}–V_{GS} characteristics measured under the dc-mode and the pulse-mode gate sweepings.