Low temperature plasma-enhanced atomic layer deposition of metal oxide thin films

Citation for published version (APA):

DOI:
10.1149/1.3428705

Document status and date:
Published: 01/01/2010

Document Version:
Publisher’s PDF, also known as Version of Record (includes final page, issue and volume numbers)

Please check the document version of this publication:
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Low Temperature Plasma-Enhanced Atomic Layer Deposition of Metal Oxide Thin Films

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Many reported atomic layer deposition (ALD) processes are carried out at elevated temperatures (>150°C), which can be problematic for temperature-sensitive substrates. Plasma-enhanced ALD routes may provide a solution, as the ALD temperature window can, in theory, be extended to lower deposition temperatures due to the reactive nature of the plasma. As such, the plasma-enhanced ALD of Al2O3, TiO2, and Ta2O5 has been investigated at 25–400°C using [Al(CH3)3], [Ti(OPr)3], [Ti(Cp3)](OPr)3, [Ta(NMe3)5], and [Ta(NMe3)3] as precursors. An O2 plasma was employed as the oxygen source in each case. We have demonstrated metal oxide thin-film deposition at temperatures as low as room temperature and compared the results with corresponding thermal ALD routes to the same materials. The composition of the films was determined by Rutherford backscattering spectroscopy. Analysis of the growth per cycle data and the metal atoms deposited per cycle revealed that the growth per cycle is strongly dependent on the film density at low deposition temperatures. Comparison of these data for Al2O3 ALD processes in particular showed that the number of Al atoms deposited per cycle was consistently high down to room temperature for the plasma-enhanced process but dropped for the thermal process at substrate temperatures lower than 250°C.

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and ALD-I, and Ta2O5 using FlexAL. The Ta2O5 results on FlexAL are
with increasing temperature.

1000 mTorr (OpAL) and 7.5–100 mTorr (ALD-I and FlexAL). Al2O3 was deposited using OpAL and FlexAL, TiO2 using FlexAL and ALD-I, and Ta2O5 using FlexAL. The Ta2O5 results on FlexAL are compared with our previous work using ALD-I.27 The compounds [Al(CH3)3] (Sigma Aldrich), [Ti(O'Pr)4] (Sigma Aldrich), novel Cp-based ALD precursors [Ti(CpMe3)(O'Pr)3] (donated by SAFC Hitech, Ltd.) and [TiCp3(OMe)3] (donated by Air Liquide), and [Ta(NMe2)5] (STREM Chemicals Ltd.), all having a purity of >99.9%, were employed as precursorsa and were contained in stainless steel bubblers. Oxygen (purity >99.999%) was used to form the plasma, and argon (purity >99.999%) was employed as the purge gas. For the processes employing [Al(CH3)3], [TiCpMe3(O'Pr)3], and [TiCp3(OMe)3], the oxygen flow was continuous throughout the entire process, but where [Ti(O'Pr)4] and [Ta(NMe2)5] were used, the flow was restricted to the plasma step. Water (VWR, GBR Rectapur grade, >99.999%) used in thermal ALD experiments was also held in a stainless steel bubbler at either ambient temperature (FlexAL) or 19°C (OpAL) to reduce the vapor pressure and prevent overdosing. The substrates were n-type Si(100) wafers, which were 100 mm in diameter for the FlexAL and OpAL reactors and ~40 × 40 mm for ALD-I. These wafers were covered with a thin native oxide (SiO2) layer and did not undergo any additional cleaning steps. The ALD conditions for each process are summarized in Table II. Film growth during the ALD process was monitored by in situ spectroscopic ellipsometry (SE), carried out using a J. A. Woollam Inc. M2000 rotating compensator ellipsometer.21,28 The atomic composition of the films was determined by Rutherford backscattering spectroscopy (RBS), except for the hydrogen concentration, which was obtained by elastic recoil detection (ERD) analysis. The detection limits for the RBS and ERD measurements are not the same for each set of measurements and were quoted where appropriate. The mass density of the films was calculated using a combination of the RBS and SE data.

### Results and Discussion

The plasma-enhanced ALD of Al2O3, TiO2, and Ta2O5 has been investigated at substrate temperatures down to 25°C. Every process was routinely monitored using in situ SE to determine the film thickness. The slope of the resulting thickness vs ALD cycles plot gave the growth per cycle for the process (an example for the depositions at 100°C is shown in Fig. 2). All ALD processes showed linear growth at every deposition temperature reported in this paper (with the exception of the TiO2 depositions from [Ti(O'Pr)4] at substrate temperatures >250°C), with no significant nucleation delay.

Aluminum oxide.—Al2O3 has been a material of high interest with respect to ALD (see the review by Puurunen). However, it is relatively recently that low substrate temperatures have been investigated. The growths per cycle of two of the most-reported thermal processes are compared with the plasma-enhanced route in Fig. 3. We deposited Al2O3 using both the plasma-enhanced and thermal processes on an Oxford Instruments FlexAL reactor28 and OpAL reactor. The growth of the plasma-enhanced method showed a gradual decrease from 0.17 nm/cycle at 25°C to 0.11 nm/cycle at 300°C. The decrease was essentially linear, with the exception of the runs at 25 and 50°C, which were slightly higher. The corresponding thermal process showed a maximum value of 0.10 nm/cycle at 200–250°C. Our results for the thermal process differ from those of Groner et al.,6 where the growth was lower at 0.13 nm/cycle. These two thermal processes were carried out in different reactors and were clearly optimized at different temperatures (where the peak of the data is). A possible reason for such a difference in growth per cycle is the water dose. Increasing the water dose (i.e., the mass of water per unit time) leads to an increase in growth per cycle without affecting the film composition.29 As more surface hydroxyl groups are created with higher doses. So despite the difference in water dose time (20 ms for our work, 2 s for Groner et al.), it is likely that our water flow rate was lower, allowing a lower growth per cycle, because the water on the OpAL reactor was actively cooled to 19°C to avoid overdosing. The reduction

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### Table I. Examples of low temperature ALD of metal oxides deposited below 150°C.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Metal precursor</th>
<th>Oxidant</th>
<th>Lowest reported temperature (°C)</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Al2O3</td>
<td>[Al(CH3)3]</td>
<td>H2O</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al2O3</td>
<td>[Al(CH3)3]</td>
<td>O3</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al2O3</td>
<td>[Al(CH3)3]</td>
<td>O3 plasma</td>
<td>25 , 14, 15, 16, and 21-23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TiO2</td>
<td>TiCl4</td>
<td>H2O</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>18 and 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TiO2</td>
<td>TiCl4</td>
<td>H2O</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TiO2</td>
<td>[Ti(O'Pr)4]</td>
<td>H2O</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>35 and 36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TiO2</td>
<td>[Ti(O'Pr)4]</td>
<td>H2O</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ta2O5</td>
<td>TaCl4</td>
<td>H2O</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ta2O5</td>
<td>[Ta(NMe2)5]</td>
<td>O2</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>45 and 46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ta2O5</td>
<td>[Ta(NMe2)5]</td>
<td>O2 plasma</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PtO2</td>
<td>[Pt(acac)2]</td>
<td>O2</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZnO</td>
<td>[Zn(CH3CH2)2]</td>
<td>H2O</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZnO</td>
<td>[Zn(CH3CH2)2]</td>
<td>H2O</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a acac is acetylacetonate, CH(C=O-CH3); CpMe3 is monomethylcyclopentadienyldimethyl, η5-C5H4(OMe)3, Me is methyl, CH3; and 'Pr is isopropyl, CH(CH3)2.
in growth per cycle for the thermal ALD process with decreasing temperature below the maximum value appears to be a result of insufficient thermal energy for the reaction between water and the methyl surface groups to occur as rapidly, resulting in fewer reactive hydroxyl surface groups with which [Al(CH3)3] can react. Unlike water, the oxygen plasma is sufficiently reactive with the surface methyl groups down to room temperature, resulting in an almost linear decrease in growth per cycle from 25–300°C. At higher deposition temperatures for the thermal processes with water, the growth per cycle profile follows that of the plasma-enhanced process. The thermal ALD process employing ozone as the oxidant reported by Kim et al.30 gave the lowest growth per cycle above 100°C (~0.09 nm/cycle). Ozone is more reactive than water toward the surface methyl groups, forming hydroxyl, methoxy, formate, and carbonate surface groups in the process.31–32 Therefore, Kim et al. suggested that the dramatic increase in growth per cycle observed at deposition temperatures below 100°C was attributed to the insufficient removal of the aforementioned oxygen-based surface groups in the steps subsequent to the oxidation because there was insufficient thermal energy with which to remove them.30 Also in this case, the ozone purge was kept constant at 3 s at 33–100°C, where a longer purge at lower temperatures may have helped to reduce the impurities. In comparison, our plasma-enhanced process where [Ti(Cp)2(O’Pr)3] and [TiCp(O’Me)3] were used only incorporated an argon flow for part of the duration. In these cases, the pumping and argon (Ar) times are given in the order they occurred during the purge. In all other cases, a continuous Ar flow was employed throughout the cycle. “Oxidant” refers to an O2 plasma for plasma-enhanced ALD and water for thermal ALD. The conditions for the Ta2O5 process on the ALD-I reactor are reported elsewhere.27

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Al2O3</th>
<th>Al2O3</th>
<th>TiO2</th>
<th>TiO2</th>
<th>TiO2</th>
<th>Ta2O5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ALD Reactor</td>
<td>Plasma-enhanced</td>
<td>Plasma-enhanced</td>
<td>Plasma-enhanced</td>
<td>Plasma-enhanced</td>
<td>Plasma-enhanced</td>
<td>Plasma-enhanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Precursor</td>
<td>[Al(CH3)3]</td>
<td>[Al(CH3)3]</td>
<td>[Ti(O’Pr)3]</td>
<td>[Ti(Cp)2(O’Pr)3]</td>
<td>[TiCp(O’Me)3]</td>
<td>[Ta(NMe2)3]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tsubstrate</td>
<td>25–400°C</td>
<td>25–400°C</td>
<td>25–400°C</td>
<td>100–400°C</td>
<td>50–300°C</td>
<td>25–250°C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tprecursor</td>
<td>~25°C</td>
<td>~25°C</td>
<td>45°C</td>
<td>70°C</td>
<td>110°C</td>
<td>65°C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Precursor dose</td>
<td>0.02 s</td>
<td>0.05 s</td>
<td>4 s</td>
<td>5 s</td>
<td>4 s</td>
<td>5 s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Precursor purge</td>
<td>3 s</td>
<td>10 s</td>
<td>4 s</td>
<td>4 s Ar</td>
<td>2 s pumping</td>
<td>5 s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plasma power</td>
<td>400 W</td>
<td>400 W</td>
<td>100 W</td>
<td>100 W</td>
<td>200 W</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxidant time</td>
<td>2 s</td>
<td>0.02 s</td>
<td>12 s</td>
<td>5 s</td>
<td>5 s</td>
<td>5 s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxid purge</td>
<td>0.5 s</td>
<td>10 s</td>
<td>1.5 s</td>
<td>2 s pumping</td>
<td>4 s pumping</td>
<td>15 s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O2 flow</td>
<td>60 sccm</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>60 sccm</td>
<td>7.5 mTorr</td>
<td>7.5 mTorr</td>
<td>50 sccm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ar flow</td>
<td>20 sccm</td>
<td>200 sccm</td>
<td>30 sccm</td>
<td>15 mTorr</td>
<td>15 mTorr</td>
<td>50 sccm (plasma)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. (Color online) The increase in film thickness with the number of ALD cycles as measured by in situ SE (deposition temperature = 100°C). The increase was linear for each precursor: (a) [Al(CH3)3], (b) [Ta(NMe2)3], (c) [Ta(NMe2)3] (ALD-I reactor), (d) [Ti(O’Pr)3], (e) [Ti(Cp)2(O’Pr)3], and (f) [TiCp(O’Me)3].

Figure 3. (Color online) A comparison of growths per cycle for the ALD of Al2O3 from [Al(CH3)3]. Shown here are the thermal process with water, as reported by Groner et al.,6 the thermal process with ozone, as reported by Kim et al.,30 and our plasma-enhanced (FlexAL) and thermal processes (FlexAL and OpAL combined).31 All lines serve as a guide to the eye.
enhanced route gave a more consistent growth per cycle profile down to 25°C and provided the highest growths per cycle over 50–300°C with the shortest cycle times.

In terms of film composition, the films deposited by both thermal and plasma-enhanced ALD in this work were over-stoichiometric at deposition temperatures below 200°C (Fig. 5a). The similar reduction in hydrogen content (Fig. 5b) with increasing substrate temperature suggests that this is due to the incorporation of hydroxyl groups in the film. In all cases, the carbon content was below the RBS detection limit (1 atom %); although thermal effusion measurements have suggested that a small quantity of carbon was present in the films deposited by this process. The mass density (Fig. 5c) was ~3.0 g cm⁻³ at deposition temperatures of 200°C and above for the plasma-enhanced process, which is close to the bulk value of Al₂O₃ (3.1 g cm⁻³). A gradual decrease was observed below 200°C to a minimum of 2.6 g cm⁻³ at 25°C. This decrease in mass density is likely to be the result of excess –OH in the film, which accounts for the higher than expected growths per cycle obtained below 100°C. The thermal water process showed no significant difference in terms of impurity content, and the mass density of the films over the temperature range was still within error, although slightly lower than that for the plasma-enhanced process. The thermal process with ozone gave over-stoichiometric films at all temperatures up to 300°C with up to 5 atom % carbon contamination.

The growth per cycle profiles are apparently all different, which, in part is caused by the varying mass densities. However, determination of the number of (metal) atoms deposited per cycle, obtained by dividing the atom density from RBS by the total number of ALD cycles, can show if this is the case. For example, if the number of atoms deposited per cycle does not vary significantly over a temperature range, any variation in growth per cycle is most likely due to the variation in mass density; however, if there is a difference in atoms deposited, other factors, such as chemical vapor deposition (CVD) or surface group loss, may be occurring. Figure 6 shows the growth per cycle data for the plasma-enhanced and thermal processes on both the FlexAL and OpAL reactors and the number of Al atoms deposited per cm² in a cycle. In terms of films deposited by plasma-enhanced ALD, there is no significant difference between the growths per cycle from either reactor; but for the thermal process, more atoms appear to have been deposited by the OpAL reactor. The OpAL reactor is not equipped with a turbo pump or load lock, so it may not be able to purge the water away as effectively as in the FlexAL reactor and the chamber vacuum has to be disrupted for sample loading. However, a greater difference in mass density would be expected for such a difference in Al atoms deposited per cycle where the growth per cycle remains the same. There is a clear gradient for Al atoms deposited per cycle with the plasma-enhanced process, showing the effect of dehydroxylation (loss of surface groups) with increasing substrate temperature. A similar gradient was observed for the growth per cycle, although this is enhanced at 25 and 50°C as a result of the decreased film density and increased OH concentration (as shown in Fig. 5). For the thermal processes, the effect of lower temperatures is clear; with the number of Al atoms deposited being half of that of the plasma-enhanced process at 100°C, suggesting that the rate of reaction is lower at these temperatures. The temperature at which the thermal process was optimized (i.e., the saturation of each ALD step was determined, which was
employed/H20851 temperature with fixed cycle settings for the plasma-enhanced ALD that the temperature window could easily be extended down to room/H20850/H20851 = 1 atom % Carbon was not detected in the films/growth rate play an important role. The film compositions of the plasma-enhanced and thermal processes using water or ozone, although the temperature at which the thermal process is optimized and the water flow rate play an important role. The film compositions of the plasma-enhanced and thermal processes were comparable, with the concentration of –OH increasing with decreasing substrate temperature. Carbon was not detected in the films (RBS detection limit = 1 atom %). Analysis of the Al atoms deposited per cycle showed that the temperature window could easily be extended down to room temperature with fixed cycle settings for the plasma-enhanced ALD of Al 2O 3. For the thermal process, temperatures lower than the optimization temperature could be considered outside the temperature window; however, if saturation curves were determined for each deposition temperature and the water flow rate were increased, this could be overcome.

Titanium dioxide.—TiO 2 is a well-studied ALD material, 19,19,34-37 and a selection of the low temperature ALD studies is summarized in Fig. 7. For the plasma-enhanced ALD of TiO 2, we employed [Ti(OiPr) 4], [Ti(CpOMe) 3(OiPr) 3], and [TiCp i (OME) 3] as precursors. 38 The heteroleptic mono Cp-based alkoxides are not sufficiently reactive with water during ALD, 39 but they are reactive with ozone 40 and an oxygen plasma. The growths per cycle for our plasma-enhanced processes were 0.05–0.06 nm/cycle, over the temperature at which the thermal process is optimized and the water flow rate play an important role. The film compositions of the plasma-enhanced and thermal processes using water or ozone, although the temperature at which the thermal process is optimized and the water flow rate play an important role. The film compositions of the plasma-enhanced and thermal processes were comparable, with the concentration of –OH increasing with decreasing substrate temperature. Carbon was not detected in the films (RBS detection limit = 1 atom %). Analysis of the Al atoms deposited per cycle showed that the temperature window could easily be extended down to room temperature with fixed cycle settings for the plasma-enhanced ALD of Al 2O 3. For the thermal process, temperatures lower than the optimization temperature could be considered outside the temperature window; however, if saturation curves were determined for each deposition temperature and the water flow rate were increased, this could be overcome.

Figure 6. (Color online) (a) The growths per cycle for plasma-enhanced and thermal ALD of Al 2O 3 on both the OpAL and FlexAL reactors. (b) The Al atoms deposited per cm 2 in a cycle. All lines serve as a guide to the eye.

Figure 7. (Color online) A comparison of growths per cycle for the ALD of TiO 2. Shown here are thermal processes: TiCl 4 and water, as reported by Aarik et al. 18,19 [Ti(OiPr) 4] and water, as reported by Ritala et al. 35,36 and [TiCp i (OME) 3] and ozone, as reported by Katamreddy et al. 40 These are compared to the plasma-enhanced processes using [Ti(OiPr) 4], [Ti(CpOMe) 3(OiPr) 3] and [TiCp i (OME) 3]. The higher growths per cycle for [Ti(OiPr) 4] resulting from anatase formation are shown as hollow squares. Lines serve as a guide to the eye.
more Ti atoms per cycle and afforded a higher growth per cycle, when compared with \([\text{TiCp}^i(\text{OMe})_2]\). In addition to the experimental inaccuracy of RBS, the \([\text{Ti(O'Pr)}_3]\) is not so straightforward, as there is no real, clear-cut linear trend. The rise in Ti atoms deposited at 300°C can be attributed to the decomposition (CVD) of the precursor, as a significant amount of carbon (\(\sim 17\) atom %) was present in films deposited at that temperature. For depositions using \([\text{Ti(O'Pr)}_3]\) at temperatures \(\geq 250°C\), crystallization was observed in the anatase form, resulting in higher growths per cycle.\(^{28}\) At 250 and 300°C, the growth began in the amorphous phase at a lower growth per cycle, after which anatase \(\text{TiO}_2\) was deposited at a much higher rate. The transitions were observed between 400–700 cycles at 250°C and above 200 cycles at 300°C. Where \([\text{TiCp}^i\text{Me}(\text{O'Pr})_3]\) was the precursor, anatase \(\text{TiO}_2\) was also observed at substrate temperatures \(\geq 250°C\), but this did not seem to have such a dramatic effect on the growth per cycle, suggesting that the \(\text{Cp}^i\text{Me}\) group inhibits the anatase formation to some extent.

In terms of film composition, films deposited by plasma-enhanced ALD from all of our Ti precursors gave stoichiometric \(\text{TiO}_2\) at 50°C and above (Fig. 8b). The film from \([\text{Ti(O'Pr)}_3]\) at 25°C was over-stoichiometric, which, as with the \(\{\text{Al(Cl)}_3\}\)/water process, is the result of the incorporation of hydroxyl groups in the film, evident by the 8 atom % hydrogen present (Fig. 8c) and the lower mass density of the film (Fig. 8d). At other temperatures, the carbon and hydrogen concentrations were below their detection limits for RBS and ERD (1 and 5 atom %, respectively) where \([\text{Ti(O'Pr)}_3]\) was the precursor. The stoichiometry of the films deposited by \([\text{TiCp}^i\text{Me}(\text{O'Pr})_3]\) and \([\text{TiCp}^i(\text{OMe})_2]\) were the same as those obtained using \([\text{Ti(O'Pr)}_3]\) (and so the data overlap in Fig. 8b), and no carbon was detected at any temperature for the \(\text{Cp}^i\) based precursors. Hydrogen was detected in the films from \([\text{TiCp}^i(\text{OMe})_2]\) (2–3 atom %), and similar quantities are possibly present in the films from the other two precursors, as the detection limit in those experiments was higher. As such, it is difficult to directly compare the hydrogen content of our films with those of Ritala et al.,\(^{35}\) as they reported a hydrogen content of \(\sim 0.3\) atom % (measured using nuclear reaction analysis with a \(^{15}\)N\(^{2+}\) beam), which is below the lowest detection limit (1 atom %) for ERD in our experiments. The films grown from \(\text{TiCl}_4\) and water at 100°C were also stoichiometric but contained 1.2 atom % chlorine, which can lead to films with a high surface roughness, due to the aforementioned etching.\(^{41}\) In terms of mass density (Fig. 8d), the films deposited by all precursors had densities over the range \(3.6–4.2\) g cm\(^{-3}\), which is comparable to the TaCl\(_5\)/water process. For the noncrystalline films below 200°C, the high density is a feature of the plasma-enhanced ALD method.

The plasma-enhanced ALD processes \(\text{TiO}_2\) using \([\text{Ti(O'Pr)}_3]\), \([\text{TiCp}^i\text{Me}(\text{O'Pr})_3]\), and \([\text{TiCp}^i(\text{OMe})_2]\) afford higher growths per cycle compared with the \([\text{Ti(O'Pr)}_3]\) and water process. They were preferable to the \(\text{TiCl}_4/\text{H}_2\text{O}\) process, in that the possibility of the films containing chlorine is negligible. The films grown in this study were consistently stoichiometric down to 50°C.

\textbf{Tantalum oxide.}—\(\text{Ta}_2\text{O}_5\) is another thoroughly studied ALD material, particularly via thermal routes using halide-\(^2\text{Pr},\text{Si}\), alkoxyde-\(^2\text{8},\text{Pr}\), and amide-based-\(^2\text{Pr},\text{Si}\) precursors. However, films grown at \(<150°C\) are not so commonly known. We recently reported the low temperature plasma-enhanced ALD of \(\text{Ta}_2\text{O}_5\) using \([\text{Ta(NEt})_2]\) on the ALD-1 reactor,\(^{27}\) which gave a growth of \(\sim 0.08\) nm/cycle over the temperature range 100–225°C (Fig. 9), which is comparable to the \(\text{TaCl}_5/\text{water}\) process above 100°C.\(^{32}\) All films were stoichiometric \(\text{Ta}_2\text{O}_5\) with a \([\text{O}]'/[\text{Ta}]\) ratio of 2.5 and

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**Figure 8.** (Color online) Compositional details of the \(\text{TiO}_2\) films deposited by plasma-enhanced ALD. (a) The Ti atoms deposited per cycle, (b) the \([\text{O}]'/[\text{Ti}]\) ratio (the ratio for stoichiometric \(\text{TiO}_2\) being represented by a dashed line), (c) the hydrogen content, and (d) the mass density of the films.
contained hydrogen (Fig. 10c). No nitrogen or carbon was detected. The mass density varied from 7.8 g cm\(^{-3}\) at 100°C to 8.1 g cm\(^{-3}\) at 225°C, which is comparable to the bulk density value of Ta\(_2\)O\(_5\) (8.24 g cm\(^{-3}\)). Maeng et al. previously carried out a comparison of the thermal and plasma-enhanced ALD of Ta\(_2\)O\(_5\) from Ta(NMe\(_2\))\(_5\) using water and an oxygen plasma, respectively.\(^{45,46}\) The thermal process afforded comparable growths, \(\sim 0.085\) nm/cycle, to those obtained in our plasma-enhanced process at 200–300°C (Fig. 9). The growths per cycle for the thermal process increased at both the higher and lower substrate temperatures due to precursor decomposition and condensation of water, respectively.\(^{45,46}\) The plasma-enhanced ALD of Ta\(_2\)O\(_5\) using Ta(NMe\(_2\))\(_5\) reported by Maeng and co-workers gave much higher growths per cycle of \(\sim 0.12\) nm. These films had an \(O/Ta\) ratio of 2.6, and no nitrogen or carbon incorporation was reported (the hydrogen content was not commented upon). The mass density reported, \(\sim 7.75\) g cm\(^{-3}\) (94% of the bulk value of Ta\(_2\)O\(_5\) although the precise substrate temperatures were not reported), was slightly lower than our previously reported values,\(^{27}\) but this difference cannot be the reason for such a significant difference in growth. It may be a result of the use of different ALD equipment, where the design of the reactor may affect the way in which precursors are introduced to the substrate. With the exception of our results, plasma-enhanced ALD using Ta(NMe\(_2\))\(_5\) afforded higher growths per cycle than the TaCl\(_5\)/water process, although the [Ta(NMe\(_2\))\(_5\)]/water process gave similar growths per cycle.

To investigate the use of different reactors, the [Ta(NMe\(_2\))\(_5\)] plasma-enhanced ALD process was transferred to the FlexAL reactor, extending the investigation down to 25°C. The growths per cycle obtained bore more resemblance to the results of Maeng et al. than those obtained using ALD-I. The increase in growth per cycle at temperatures below 100°C was significant, which was again a result of the low mass density of the film as the number of Ta atoms deposited did not change dramatically over the temperature range (Fig. 10a and d). At 250°C, there was also an increase in growth per cycle, due to the decomposition of the [Ta(NMe\(_2\))\(_5\)] precursor. This was consistent with the thermogravimetric analysis of the precursor in the literature,\(^{33}\) which showed the onset of decomposition at around 200°C. The effect of the CVD is clearly shown by the almost twofold increase in the Ta deposited at 250°C, and to a much lesser extent at 200°C.

Despite the similarity in the numbers of atoms being deposited per cycle between the ALD-I and FlexAL reactors, the film compo-
sitions were different (Fig. 10b-d). The films deposited on the ALD-I reactor had a density close to that of the bulk, were stoichiometric Ta$_2$O$_5$, and contained very low concentrations of hydrogen. At 50 and 100°C on the FlexAL reactor, the films were overstoichiometric with an excess of oxygen (Fig. 10b). The films also contained significant concentrations of hydrogen (up to 35 atom %), which are very high when compared with the Al$_2$O$_3$, TiO$_2$, and other Ta$_2$O$_5$ processes. However, in common with these processes, the hydrogen concentration decreased with increasing substrate temperature. It is likely that there is a significant presence of OH groups in the film; therefore, it might just be coincidence that the film at 25°C was stoichiometric, as there was a significant presence of hydrogen and oxygen in that film. Carbon and nitrogen were not detected at any temperature (RBS detection limit = 5 atom % in each case). There was a positive correlation between substrate temperature and film density (Fig. 10d), but the densities were much lower than expected for a good ALD film, less than half the bulk value below 50°C. This is significantly because of the relatively short plasma purge of 0.5 s. Analysis of the metal atoms deposited per cycle observed were comparable to those reported for the plasma- or ozone. In fact, the use of a plasma or ozone is a necessity with the Ta$_2$O$_5$ process. In TiO$_2$, no signs of hydrogen and oxygen in that film. Carbon and nitrogen were not detected at any temperature (RBS detection limit = 5 atom % in each case). The films deposited on the Al$_2$O$_3$, TiO$_2$, and Ta$_2$O$_5$ processes have been extended down to lower but the films were stoichiometric down to 100°C and contained less hydrogen. The film densities varied considerably, depending on the reactor.

In summary, the use of an oxygen plasma has the benefits of reducing the cycle time and giving higher growths per cycle than corresponding thermal processes due to its high reactivity. Analysis of films deposited per cycle aids in the clarification of where the boundaries of the temperature window lie as it is not affected by variations in film density.

Acknowledgments

The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Community’s Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013) under grant agreement number CP-FP213996-1. The authors thank L. R. J. G. van den Elzen, J. C. Goverde, and D. Hoogland for their assistance in the depositions and J. J. A. Zeebregts, M. J. F. van de Sanden, and C. A. A. van Helvoirt for their technical assistance, support, and advice. SAFIC Hitech Ltd. and Air Liquide are also thanked for their donations of [Ti(Cp$^{3+}$)(OPr)$_3$]$_2$ and [TiCp(OOMe)$_3$]$_2$. However, such a difference in growth per cycle and film density has not been observed for other processes.

Conclusions

We have deposited Al$_2$O$_3$, TiO$_2$, and Ta$_2$O$_5$ thin films using plasma-enhanced ALD and addressed the ability of plasma-enhanced ALD to deposit metal oxide thin films at temperatures as low as room temperature. Analysis of the metal atoms deposited per cycle provided a clearer view as to where the edges of the temperature window were and complemented the generally accepted growth per cycle version. With this in mind, the temperature windows for the Al$_2$O$_3$, TiO$_2$, and Ta$_2$O$_5$ processes have been extended down to 25, 50, and 100°C, respectively.

For Al$_2$O$_3$, the film compositions were comparable to those deposited by the related thermal ALD processes down to 150°C. The film quality was fair to good down to 100°C and contained less hydrogen. The film densities varied considerably, depending on the reactor.

In summary, the use of an oxygen plasma has the benefits of reducing the cycle time and giving higher growths per cycle than corresponding thermal processes due to its high reactivity.