Al_2O_3-SiO_2 Dielectric Films from Metal Alkoxides

Soh Deawha* · Korobova Natalya**

*Myongji University, Korea, **Kazakh National University, Kazakhstan

dwhsoh@mju.ac.kr

Abstract

The preparation of Al2O3-SiO2 thin films from less than one micron to several tens of microns in thickness had been prepared from metal alkoxide sols. Two methods, dip-withdrawal and electrophoretic deposition, were employed for thin films and sheets formation. The requirements to be satisfied by the solution for preparing uniform and strong films and by the factors affecting thickness and other properties of the films were examined. For the preparation of thin, continuous Al2O3-SiO2 films, therefore, metal-organic-derived precursor solutions contained Si and Al in a chemically polymerized form has been developed and produced in a clear liquid state.

Keywords

Al_2O_3-SiO_2, alkoxide, electrophoretic deposition, crystallization process

Ⅰ. Introduction

The sol-gel technique has been used for many years and the metal alkoxides and alkoxysilanes have featured prominently as source materials. The method consists of making a homogeneous solution of the component metal alkoxides in a suitable solvent, usually the parent alcohol, and then causing the hydrolysis under controlled conditions to produce a gel containing the hydrated metal oxide. The gel is then dried, compacted, and fired to produce a ceramic or glassy material at a temperature much lower than that required by the conventional melting process. The advantages of the sol-gel process reside in the high purity of the metal alkoxide precursors, the homogeneity of the components at the molecular level, and the low processing temperature. These features are all of paramount importance in fabricating electronic ceramics. In the metal alkoxide process, a metal alkoxide solution is gelled through hydrolysis- polymerization and converted to an oxide glass by heating at relatively low temperature [1]. The most noticeable advantage of the metal alkoxide process is the low temperature of heat treatment. Heating up to several hundred degrees is often sufficient to obtain product. This paper discusses the preparation of dielectric Al_2O_3-SiO_2 films of several tens of microns in thickness and very thin coating films (less than one micron) from metal alkoxide sols. Two methods were employed for thin sheet formation. In the first method the sheet was formed in a thin metal foil by putting the foil into the solution and pulling it up. Electrophoretic deposition of the complex alkoxide sol on a metal plate is the second method [2].

Ⅱ. Experimental Procedure

1. Powder preparation
: Stoichiometric Aluminum Silicate (Mullite)

Since the studies of phase relation in the Al_2O_3-SiO_2 system by Bowen and Greig [3], considerable effort has been directed toward the synthesis of polycrystalline stoichiometric mullite with the composition $3Al_2O_3$* SiO_2. kaolinite and related materials are thermally decomposed to mixed oxides for preparing mullite [4]. The major problem is that, regardless of the starting Al_2O_3-SiO_2 ratio (in the range from 3:2 to 2:1), sintering the powder in the absence of a liquid phase produces mullite of 3:2 composition with a chunky granular habit, whereas rapid cooling from the liquid phase forms a 2:1 composition with a needlelike habit. Many authors concluded that the compositions attempted so far produce non-stoichiometric mullite. Invariably the product contains excess SiO_2 or Al_2O_3 as a second phase.

2. Synthesis of Metal Alkoxides

Aluminum tris isopropoxide was prepared by a reaction reported by [5]. Metal foil of 99.999 + %

purity was reacted with excess isoproply alcohol using a small amount of $HgCl_2$ (10^{-4} mol/mol of metal) as a catalyst. Silicon tetra-isopropoxide was formed by the methods of Bradley et al. [5].

The 99.95% $SiCl_4$ was used as-received. Analytical grade isopropyl alcohol was dried over CaH_2 and fractionally distilled at its boiling point..

3. Powder Preparation and Analysis

The mixed oxide containing 71.8 wt% Al_2O_3 and 28.2 wt% SiO_2 was prepared by the hydrolytic decomposition of a solution of the corresponding metal alkoxide. Aluminum tris isopropoxide was added to a stoichiometric amount of silicon tetrakis isopropoxide. The mixed alkoxide were refluxed in excess isopropyl alcohol for 16 h before hydrolysis to ensure thorough mixing. The hydroxy-aluminosilicate was prepared by slowly adding the alkoxide solution to ammoniated triply distilled deionized water. Hydroxy-aluminosilicate then, was repeatedly washed with dry isopropyl alcohol and dried in vacuum at 60℃ for 16 h.

4. Crystallite Growth and Morphology

The powders as-prepared and calcined at 600 ℃ statically for 1 and 24 h and dynamically for 24 h were examined by electron microscopy. The powders were dispersed ultrasonically in a solution of absolute ethyl alcohol; a small amount of the dispersion was then placed in a Freon nebulizer and sprayed into a carbon substrate on a Cu mesh screen. In the alkoxy-derived mullite at near-room temperature condition and calcined to higher temperatures, the needlelike morphology of the crystallites is retained in the absence of a liquid phase, contrary to the findings of previous investigators. The intimate mixing of highly active fine particulates in the alkoxide decomposition process described is apparently responsible for formation of the acicular morphology which is characteristic of crystalline mullite.

5. Lattice Parameters

Minor compositional changes and different thermal histories of mullite samples result in a significant variation in the observed cell dimensions of the orthorhombic crystal structure. These variation result mainly from the many possibilities for Al-Si order-disorder [6]. Debye-Scherrer X-ray diffraction data were used to compute the lattice parameters and theoretical density of mullite. The unit-cell volume of the specimen fired at 600 ℃ for 30 min is larger than that of the specimens with the same composition fired at 650 ℃ for 15 and 30 min. This behavior

may result from an amorphous phase and disorder still present in the microstructure at the lower firing temperature. This point is discussed further.

6. Starting solution preparation

The starting solution (Solution A) consisting of aluminum tris isopropoxide and a stoichiometric amount of silicon tetraethoxide = 15 g, and 0.75 g 35 % HCl, and 3.7 g 95 % C_2H_5OH was employed to make thin sheets by the first and second methods. The solution was hydrolyzed at 40℃ or 80℃. Thin sheet formation becomes possible when the solution reaches viscosity ranging from 20 to 100 cP in the first method and from 10 to 15 cP in the second (electrophoresis). On further increase in viscosity, the solution scooped by the foil forms a bulky mass, which makes thin sheet formation impossible. The gel sheet thus prepared becomes a transparent Al_2O_3-SiO_2 glass sheet, 10-40 μm thick, on heating to 500-700 ℃. No crystalline peak was detected in the X-ray diffraction pattern of the products. When the viscosity reacted about 3 or 5 cP, 1 cm^3 of the viscous solution was poured onto a thin metal foil of 3 3 cm with frames and was spread to cover the whole foil plate as a sheet. The sheet was about 200 μm thick initially and about 100 μm thick on solidification, although the thickness depended upon the composition of the solution. It was found that some solutions formed sheets without severe cracks and others. The ease of sheet formation was evaluated by the number of fragments that are produced as a result of fracture of the sheet during formation.

The metal alkoxide complex/alcohol solution is exploited by the electrophoretic deposition in order to prepare thin solid films. Gels prepared by hydrolysis of metal alkoxides during electrophoretic deposition at room temperature and standard atmospheric pressure are generally porous and contain water and alcohol. When the gels are heated, they liberate the water + alcohol and convert into the nonporous impervious glasses. Tetraethoxysilane $Si(OEt)_4$ was mixed with ethanol EtOH, the mole ratio $EtOH/Si(OEt)_4$ = 5/1. An appropriate amount of aluminum tri- isopropoxide $Al(O-iPr)_3$ was then poured into the solution and the reflux was continued at 70℃ for 1 h. The clear solution obtained was diluted with EtOH and served as a coating solution. The coating was carried out in an electrophoresis manner in a humidity-controlled glove box. Two platinum electrodes that were connected to the two poles of a conventional electrophoresis power supply produce the lateral electric field. Gel on the electrode of 1.3 mm thickness was electrophoresed

for about 3-5 min at 200 V. The pH gradient from 7 to 6 near the electrode position was observed. The quality of the films was very sensitive to the humidity of the atmosphere, as mentioned above. Transparent films were obtained below 20 % relative humidity at 20 ℃. The substrates coated gel were kept for a while in the glove box to let the solvents evaporate and then heat-treated in air. The temperature of heat treatment was raised stepwise at intervals of 100 ℃ for 10 min. The thickness of the coating films, as measured by surface profilometer, was in a range of 1300 to 1500 nm, depending on the mole ratio $Al(OR)_3/Si(OR)_4$ and on the degree of dilution of the coating solution by EtOH. The load at scratch was measured on films 60 nm thick though the IR spectra were measured on films 1300 nm thick. Other films having Al_2O_3 : SiO_2 ratios of 1/2 and 1/1 were prepared by the same procedure. The shrinkage of the gels on heating was measured by a heating rate of 5 ℃ /min. The water concentration in the non-porous films prepared by heating the gels was determined by measuring the infrared absorption at 3670 cm^{-1}.

III. Results

Dip coating makes it possible to coat the substrate at relatively low temperatures. Also it is easily applied to very large surfaces compared with sputtering and vapor deposition. The formation of a coating film is different from that of a thin sheet in the following respects; 1) Very thin films of 0.05-0.2 μm in thickness are produced by one coating run, that is through a dip-withdrawal- heating process. Thicker films can be prepared by repetition of the whole coating process. 2) Use of diluted solutions is important for obtaining uniform coating films, which firmly adhere to the substrate. 3) The successful coating can be made with the solution 1-6 cP in viscosity. This viscosity is very low compared with about 5 cP when thin sheets are prepared. 4) The oxidation-reduction equilibrium of a transition metal tends towards the oxidation side because of the low temperatures of preparation. Three kinds of solutions C1, C2 and C3 containing 1.7 wt%, 4.3 wt% and 6.4 wt% Al_2O_3-SiO_2, respectively, were prepared from 0.01-0.05 mol. aluminum isopropoxide Al (i-OC₃H₇)₃ and 0.01-0.05 mol. Si(OC₂H₅)₄, 0.01 mol. water, 0.01 acetic acid, and 100 mℓ isopropyl alcohol i-C₃H₇OH. The starting solution was prepared by adding mixture of alkoxides and i-C₃H₇OH under reflux and stirring in N₂ at 82 ℃; then H₂O and CH₃COOH were added.
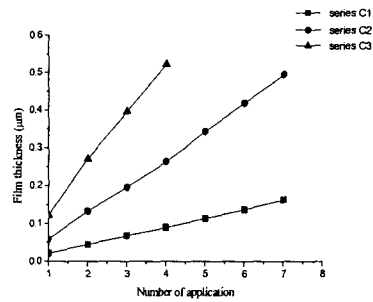

Fig. 1. Film thickness (μm) versus number of application for Al2O3-SiO2 films by dip-coating technique. C1, C2, C3 solutions contain 1.7 wt%, 4.3 wt%, and 6.4 wt% Al_2O_3-SiO_2, respectively.

Coating was performed in ambient atmosphere. After dipping into the alkoxide solution, the glass or stainless steel substrate was withdrawn upwards at a rate of 0.150-0.60 mm/s, and heated for 10 min at 500 ℃. This was repeated many times to increase the film thickness. Uniform and transparent films were obtained. Figure 2 shows the change of thickness with the number of applications or the soda-lime-silica glass substrate. A linear relationship is found. Further, the thickness is larger for larger Al_2O_3-SiO_2 concentrations of the solution.
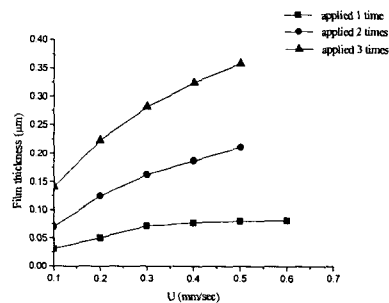

Fig. 2. Change of film thickness (μm) with the rate of withdrawal U for Al_2O_3-SiO_2 coating films.

All films obtained from solutions with concentration more than 10 wt% crack during crystallization (Table 2d). The same phenomenon is observed when a few amorphous layers, applied without thermal treatment after each layer, undergo crystallization. High-quality crystalline films can only be obtained from diluted solutions (1 to 5 wt%). Such solutions lead to the formation of films with a thickness 200 to 300 nm which survive crystallization without cracking. In order to

obtain thicker layers, application should be repeated with obligatory heat treatment at 400 ℃ for 15 min the crystallization conditions for a thin film. Insufficient drying of the solvent or prolonged storage of the diluted solutions before their utilization lead to the formation of "bubbles" (50 nm in depth) in the layer (Table 2b).
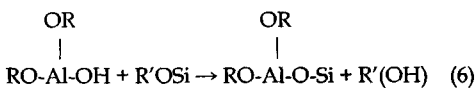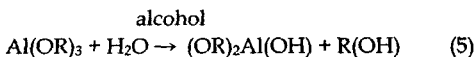
Table 2. Conditions of Al_2O_3-SiO_2 film preparation on Pt foils and room temperature properties

Properties of sol-film	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)
Al_2O_3/SiO_2 in sol/film	1/1.03	1/1.2	1/1.4	1/1.7
"age" of sol	1h	24h	1 week	2 week
heat-treatment ℃, 30 min	400	450	450	500
phases present	amorph.	amorph. + δ-Al_2O_3	amorph. + cryst.	cryst. + amorp.
thickness, nm	1300	1500	1500	1500
resistivity, ohm cm	7 1010	9 108	107	106
electric strength 107 V/m	4.5	3.9	3	2.1
tangent δ (at f=1kHz)	0,007	0,011	0,012	0,024
dielectric constant ε	7,2	7,2	7,1	6,9
capacitance, 10^{-2} F/m' at U=30V	0,06	0,05	0,04	0,02
fracture toughness, MN/m$^{3/2}$, K1c	2.73	2, 95	2, 85	2,13
Young's modulus, GPa, E	246	254	241	219
sintered density, d, g/cm	3.16	3, 653	3, 435	3, 369

The addition of a very small amount of water containing alcohol leads to a significant increase in the quantity of "bubbles", and application of the same solution a week after the addition of water spoils the surface completely (Table 2c). At the same time, application of a freshly prepared solution in ethyl alcohol subsequently leads to the formation of films without any "bubbles".

IV. Discussion

In all methods of producing monolithic films, the chemical polymerization of Si and Al is accomplished by use of metal-organic compounds. One alkyl in the alkoxide molecule is converted to a hydroxyl group by partial hydrolysis and reacts with the alkyl groups of the other alkoxide, as shown in eqs. (5) and (6):

$$Al(OR)_3 + H_2O \xrightarrow{alcohol} (OR)_2Al(OH) + R(OH) \qquad (5)$$

$$RO\text{-}Al\text{-}OH + R'OSi \rightarrow RO\text{-}Al\text{-}O\text{-}Si + R'(OH) \qquad (6)$$

The resultant material contains Si and Al bound via oxygen. Excess water in alcohol must be accompanied by the addition of acid to act as a peptizing agent, preventing the agglomeration of large particles. Once the clear liquid precursor is obtained, it can be applied to a substrate by any liquid application method, e.g., dipping, spraying, electrophoretic deposition, etc.. Almost any substrate can be used, so long as the thickness of the coating is kept below a critical value, e.g., 1 μm, which varies slightly from one substrate to another. Porous α-Al_2O_3 tubes that are available commercially were coated with continuous films successfully.

V. Conclusions

A method of forming thin, continuous Al_2O_3-SiO_2 films and coatings from metal-organic-derived precursor solutions has been developed. The precursor is produced in a clear liquid state that contains Si and Al in a chemically polymerized form. When applied to substrates, this liquid leaves a transparent, continuous film that converts to crystalline Al_2O_3-SiO_2 upon heating from 600 to 1000℃. A significant change of the film density takes place in the crystallization process, thus leading to strict requirements as to the thickness of the film that can survive crystallization.

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