Enhanced dielectric properties in single crystal-like BiFeO$_3$ thin films grown by flux-mediated epitaxy

S.-H. Lim, M. Murakami, J. H. Yang, S.-Y. Young, J. Hattrick-Simpers, M. Wuttig, L. G. Salamanca-Riba, and I. Takeuchi

Department of Materials Science and Engineering, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland 20742, USA

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We have fabricated single crystal-like BiFeO$_3$ (BFO) thin films by flux-mediated epitaxy using pulsed laser deposition (PLD). The Bi–Cu–O flux composition and its thickness were optimized using composition spread, thickness gradient, and temperature gradient libraries. The optimized BFO thin films grown with this technique showed larger grain size of ~2 $\mu$m and higher dielectric constant in the range of 260–340 than those for standard PLD grown films. In addition, the leakage current density of the current films was reduced by two orders of magnitude compared to that of standard PLD grown films. © 2008 American Institute of Physics. [DOI: 10.1063/1.2831665]

Multiferroic BiFeO$_3$ (BFO) thin films are widely studied because of their antiferromagnetic and ferroelectric ordering well above room temperature. In pursuing their device applications, it is critical to address and control their microstructural variation and the relatively large leakage current primarily due to the high volatility of Bi and heteroepitaxial constraints imposed by the substrate. The strain in the films together with the evaporation of bismuth can produce Bi deficient secondary phases such as antiferromagnetic $\alpha$-Fe$_2$O$_3$, and ferromagnetic $\gamma$-Fe$_2$O$_3$ and Fe$_3$O$_4$ which form to compensate the local imbalance in chemical composition and structural distortion.

In our previous work, we observed enhancement of strain relaxation and magnetization in Bi–Fe–O films that contained $\alpha$- and $\gamma$-Fe$_2$O$_3$ phases. Bismuth deficiencies and oxygen vacancies are known to induce significant leakage current density by forming impurity energy levels in the bandgap. Many attempts have been made to improve the crystallinity and enhance the properties of BFO thin films by different growth techniques. However, the films frequently have high densities of defects because of the high growth temperature required in these techniques. In this work, we report a substantial improvement of leakage current and dielectric properties ($\varepsilon \approx 260–340$) in single crystal-like BFO films grown by flux-mediated epitaxy (FME).

In the FME method, an oxide flux on the surface of the film plays a key role in improving the crystallinity of complex oxide films. The vapor ablated from the target material by a pulsed laser meets the flux on the surface of the substrate, diffuses into the liquid intermediate phase and finally solidifies on a predeposited seed layer. The liquid phase (flux) prevents direct deposition of the vapor phase on the solid surface and improves crystallinity. Compared to pulsed laser deposition (PLD), in the FME method, there is enhanced diffusion of the surface atoms in the flux above the quasimelting temperature (~0.57$T_m$), which leads to film growth in equilibrium even at high growth rates.

In this work, BFO thin films were grown on SrRuO$_3$ (SRO) buffered (001) oriented SrTiO$_3$ (STO) substrates by standard PLD and by FME for comparison. We ablated a 10% Bi excess Bi$_{1.1}$FeO$_3$ target with a KrF excimer laser ($\lambda$=248 nm) at 650 °C and 20 mTorr oxygen partial pressure. Under these conditions, the PLD grown films showed a pure BFO phase. For the FME growth, a mixture of Bi$_2$O$_3$ and CuO was selected for the flux material as explained below. The films were characterized using scanning x-ray microdiffraction (XRD), atomic force microscopy (AFM), and transmission electron microscopy (TEM). For the electrical measurements, Pt (100 nm) and epitaxial SRO (50 nm) layers were used as top and bottom electrodes, respectively.

The schematic in Fig. 1(a) shows the deposition procedure for the combinatorial library used to optimize the composition, temperature, and thickness of the Bi$_2$O$_3$–CuO flux. The typical library chip size was 9 mm × 4 mm. The oxygen partial pressure for the growth of the FME-BFO film was varied in the range of 0.05–1 Torr. A BFO seed layer (~10 nm) was deposited at 650 °C and 30 mTorr oxygen pressure. The XRD map for the region with 10 vol % CuO shows the deposition procedure for the combinatorial library used to optimize the composition, temperature, and thickness of the Bi$_2$O$_3$–CuO flux. The typical library chip size was 9 mm × 4 mm.

![FIG. 1.](https://example.com/fig1.png)

Color online (a) Schematic of the deposition procedure for temperature gradient (580–810 °C) and composition spread experiment. The composition spread consisted of Bi$_2$O$_3$ (40 nm) and CuO (0–40 nm). (b) XRD map of the intensity of the BFO (001) peak as a function of substrate temperature and CuO flux composition (thickness). (c) XRD map in the region marked I in (b) for 0% CuO. (d) XRD map for the region with 10 vol % CuO (labeled II in [b]) with the highest intensity of the BFO (001) peak. The shaded region in (d) shows an enlargement of the growth window of BFO compared to that for films deposited without CuO (c).
partial pressure before depositing the flux material to lead to
growth of BFO. After increasing the temperature to 730 °C,
a Bi₂O₃ layer (~1 nm) and a CuO layer (~1 nm) were de-
posited in an alternating manner to induce inter-
diffusion between the layers and to prepare a layer with a
gradient in composition of the flux. The total thickness of
Bi₂O₃ was fixed to 40 nm. Using a moving shadow mask in
the PLD chamber during the deposition of CuO, a layer with
a thickness gradient was achieved. These conditions gave
rise to regions with different ratios of Bi₂O₃/CuO in the
flux which varied from pure Bi₂O₃ (without CuO) to
(Bi₂O₃)0.5–CuO0.5. In addition, a temperature gradient
from 560 to 805 °C was achieved on the substrate over a
distance of 9 mm by heating one side of the sample stage
using a semiconductor laser. Following the deposition of the
flux, a 300 nm thick BFO thin film was deposited on the flux
layer.

Figure 1(b) shows the intensity map of the (001) BFO
diffraction peak as a function of position of the sample which
corresponds to changes in CuO layer thickness (0–40 nm)
and the sample growth temperature. The highest intensity of
the (001) BFO peak was observed in the region with CuO
thickness of 0.4–17 nm and temperature of 710–750 °C. To
understand the effect of CuO on the Bi based flux growth,
temperature dependent XRD spectra in the regions with
0 vol % CuO [line I in Fig. 1(b)] and ~4.5 nm thick CuO
(10 vol % CuO) [line II in Fig. 1(b)] are compared in Figs.
1(c) and 1(d), respectively. The regions with pure Bi₂O₃ flux
show a strong Bi₂O₃ XRD intensity peak over a large range
of temperatures below 730 °C. This region overlaps with the
temperature range for Fe₂O₃ growth [see Fig. 1(c)]. Figure
1(d) shows that addition of 10 vol % CuO in the flux plays
an important role, namely, CuO decreases the melting tem-
perature of the Bi₂O₃–CuO flux material thereby suppress-
ging the precipitation of Bi₂O₃. Furthermore, the amount of
Bi₂O₃ melt in the flux compensates for evaporated Bi thus
suppressing the formation of Fe₂O₃.16 The comparison of the
shadow areas in Figs. 1(c) and 1(d) illustrates the enlarged
growth window of BFO for a flux with 10 vol % CuO. Fol-
lowing the combinatorial optimization, a BFO thin film was
grown by FME using the optimum flux composition
(10 vol % CuO) and the optimized growth temperature
(730 °C).

The AFM image in Fig. 2(b) shows dramatically in-
creased grain size (~2 μm) for the FME grown BFO film,
which is more than ten times larger than the grain size for
films grown by standard PLD [shown in Fig. 2(a) with typi-
cal grain size of 50–200 nm]. The height profile of the FME
grown BFO film [Fig. 2(c)] shows a fairly smooth surface
(compared to the standard PLD grown BFO films) with an
average step height of ~1.2 nm, which corresponds to three
unit cells of BFO [see inset to Fig. 2(c)]. The width of the
terraces varies in the range from 70 to 100 nm.

A cross-sectional bright field TEM image (top) and high
resolution images (bottom) of the FME grown BFO film in
Fig. 3 exhibit epitaxial growth with very sharp interfaces and
smooth surface of the BFO film. In the large area view [Fig.
3(a)], the film grown by FME shows single crystal-like BFO
film without grain boundaries, and we see no evidence of
bismuth deficient secondary phases such as Fe₂O₃ (α or γ),
or Fe₂O₄ as we have previously observed in films grown
by PLD at low oxygen partial pressure.8,9 The lattice con-
stants of the BFO film determined from XRD and electron
diffraction patterns are a=b=0.394 nm (in plane) and
c=0.397 nm (out of plane). These values indicate that the
film grown by FME still suffers from some residual com-
pressive strain (~0.9%), originating from the lattice mis-
match (~1.15%) between the substrate and the film, even
though the film was grown under a quasiequilibrium condi-
tion facilitated by the flux.

Figure 4(a) shows the dielectric constant (ε) of BFO thin
films grown by the FME method (labeled “FME-BFO”) and
by standard PLD technique (labeled “PLD-BFO”) as a func-
tion of frequency. The dissipation factor (tan δ) values of the
FME-BFO film and (100) oriented PLD-BFO film were
0.011±0.009 and 0.012±0.01, respectively, in the frequency
range of 10 kHz–10 MHz at room temperature. The dielec-
tric constant values of the PLD-BFO thin films varied from
80–130 depending on the frequency and crystalline orienta-
tion of the films. These values are slightly higher than the
values reported for bulk BFO.17,18 In contrast, the dielectric
constant of FME-BFO films is three times as large (260–340)
as that of PLD-BFO films. This may be due to the enhanced
crystallinity with the large grain size (~2 μm) in the FME
grown films. The leakage current density of FME-BFO thin
Fe$_2^+$ –O$_2^-$ –Fe$_3^+$ ions. Therefore, the concentration of Fe$_2^+$ could explain leakage by double exchange interaction among the film did not show any significant amount of Fe$_2^+$ ions which FME grown films exhibited single crystal quality with large growth conditions by the combinatorial method. The hopping of electrons to these defect levels.19 levels in the band gap that increase free carrier density by vacancies and Bi deficiency in PLD-BFO induce impurity energy bands in the PLD-BFO films. One possible reason for the leakage current in PLD-BFO films could be the larger fractional area of grain boundary regions in these films, which allow current to pass through with less resistance than in the bulk of the grains. Another possibility is that oxygen vacancies and Bi deficiency in PLD-BFO induce impurity energy levels in the band gap that increase free carrier density by hopping of electrons to these defect levels.19

In summary, we improved the crystallinity of BFO films by flux-mediated epitaxy. For the FME growth, we optimized the growth conditions by the combinatorial method. The FME grown films exhibited single crystal quality with large grain size (~2 µm) and a flat surface as well as higher dielectric constant and lower leakage current than films grown by standard PLD.

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