Etching of CoFeB Using CO/NH3 in an Inductively Coupled Plasma Etching System

Jong-Yoon Park,a Se-Koo Kang,a Min-Hwan Jeon,a Myung S. Jhon,c and Geun-Young Yeonb,∗

aSungkyunkwan University Advanced Institute of Nano Technology, and bDepartment of Advanced Materials Science and Engineering, Sungkyunkwan University, Suwon, Gyeonggi-do 440-746, Korea
cDepartment of Chemical Engineering, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15213, USA

A CoFeB thin film composing a magnetic tunneling junction of CoFeB/MgO/CoFeB was etched in an inductively coupled plasma (ICP) etching system using CO/NH3 gas mixtures, and its etch characteristics were compared with those of the CoFeB thin film etched using Cl2/Ar. When Cl2/Ar was used to etch the CoFeB thin film, even though its etch rate was faster than that of the CoFeB thin film etched using CO/NH3, a rough CoFeB surface could be observed due to the corrosion of the CoFeB surface during exposure to the air in addition to the significant change of surface composition. On the other hand, no corrosion of the CoFeB thin film was observed after the etching using CO/NH3. When the ratio of CO/NH3 was varied, the highest etch rate of 12 nm/min could be observed at the ratio of 1:3 compared to about 4 nm/min for CO or NH3 at the ICP source power of 700 W, bias power of 300 W, and 5 mTorr of operating pressure. The highest etch rate was related to the formation of volatile metal carbonyls between metal and CO, where NH3 appeared to assist the easier formation of metal carbonyl by preventing the dissociation of CO into C and CO2.

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Magnetic random access memory (MRAM) devices have fast access time, high storage densities, radiation harness, and infinite rewrite capability in contrast to conventional memory devices. MRAM, a nonvolatile memory device with low power consumption, is being investigated as one of the most suitable alternatives for the next generation memory devices. Among the MRAMs, spin-transfer-torque (STT)-MRAM has the characteristics that are applicable to highly integrated circuit because of the lower required current density in the operation of the device. For STT-MRAM, ferromagnetic layers such as CoFeB/MgO/CoFeB are used as the magnetic tunneling junction (MTJ) layer.1 The MTJ layer composed of CoFeB/MgO/CoFeB is etched in an inductively coupled plasma etching system. Cl2/Ar plasmas for magnetic multilayer structures using Cl2/Ar plasmas are also reported using conventional reactive ion etching techniques; however, these processes tend to show problems due to nonvolatile products remaining on the sidewalls of the device and the corrosion caused by residual chlorine.2,7,9 As a result, for the minimization of the corrosion after the etching in addition to the formation of volatile etch products, etching chemistries which may form volatile metal organic gases with magnetic materials such as CO/NH3 and CH3OH have been investigated in the recent researches.2,8,11,13 For example, Otani et al.4 reported the successful etching of the 100-nm-scale CoFeB/MgO/CoFeB MTJs using a CH3OH etching process in an inductively coupled plasma (ICP) etching system. Nakatani et al.15 also reported the etching of NiFe and NiFeCo using noncorrosive CO/NH3 gases in a capacitively coupled plasma etching system. In their researches, an increase was observed in the etch rate of NiFe and NiFeCo for about five times by the addition of 50% NH3 to CO.

It is believed that the gas combination of CO/NH3 can also be applied to the etching of the MTJ layer composed of CoFeB/MgO/CoFeB by forming volatile metal organic gases similar to CH3OH, even though no research on the etching of CoFeB/MgO/CoFeB using a CO/NH3 gas combination has been reported. Therefore, in this study, the magnetic layers such as CoFeB, and MgO composing the MTJ layer were etched using CO/NH3 gas combination in an ICP system and their etch characteristics were investigated.

Experimental

The etch system used in the experiment is shown in Fig.1. The etch system was a commercial ICP etching system (STS PLC, UK) with a load lock. As shown in the figure, one-turn inductive coil was wound around the ceramic chamber wall for the inductive coupling to the plasma and 13.56 MHz rf power was applied to the coil. The substrate size was 8 in. diameter, and a 13.56 MHz rf power was also applied to the substrate for the rf biasing. During the processing, the substrate was cooled to about 40–50°C by He cooling.

CoFeB, a magnetic material of the MTJ layer composed of CoFeB/MgO/CoFeB, was used as the sample to be etched, and other materials forming the MRAM, such as MgO and Ti (etch mask of MTJ layer), were also etched and their etch characteristics were compared. These materials were prepared by a cosputter deposition technique. Cl2/Ar and the CO/NH3 gas mixtures were used to etch the sidewalls of the device and the corrosion caused by residual chlorine.2,7,9 As a result, for the minimization of the corrosion after the etching in addition to the formation of volatile etch products, etching chemistries which may form volatile metal organic gases with magnetic materials such as CO/NH3 and CH3OH have been investigated in the recent researches.2,8,11,13 For example, Otani et al.4 reported the successful etching of the 100-nm-scale CoFeB/MgO/CoFeB MTJs using a CH3OH etching process in an inductively coupled plasma (ICP) etching system. Nakatani et al.15 also reported the etching of NiFe and NiFeCo using noncorrosive CO/NH3 gases in a capacitively coupled plasma etching system. In their researches, an increase was observed in the etch rate of NiFe and NiFeCo for about five times by the addition of 50% NH3 to CO.

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CoFeB and Ti were also etched using CO/NH$_3$ gas mixtures instead of Cl$_2$/Ar gas mixtures, and the results are shown in Fig. 2b. The ICP power, bias power, operating pressure, and gas flow rates were maintained at the same conditions as in Fig. 2a. In Fig. 2b, the MgO etch rate is also shown. In Fig. 2b, the etch rate of CoFeB is shown to be a maximum of 12 nm/min at a CO/NH$_3$ gas mixture ratio of 1:3 while the etch rate for both pure CO and pure NH$_3$ is about 4 nm/min. Therefore, about three times higher etch rate could be achieved by using the CO/NH$_3$ gas mixture instead of pure gases. The etch rate of MgO at the CO/NH$_3$ gas mixture ratio also appeared to follow that of CoFeB by showing a higher etch rate of 11 nm/min at the CO/NH$_3$ gas mixture ratio of 1:3 compared to about 6 nm/min at the CO/NH$_3$ gas mixture ratio of 1:1. However, in the case of Ti, no significant change of etch rate was observed with the change of CO/NH$_3$ gas mixture ratio. When Ni, Co, or Fe is etched using CO/NH$_3$, it is known that these metals form metal carbonyls such as Ni(CO)$_4$, Co$_2$(CO)$_8$, and Fe(CO)$_5$ by the recombination of CO with these metals.

In Table I, the boiling points of Fe carbonyls and Co carbonyls are also shown and, as shown in Table I, due to the boiling points of these metal carbonyls such as 52°C for Co$_2$(CO)$_8$ and 103°C for Fe(CO)$_5$, low vapor pressures of these metal carbonyls are also expected. Therefore, high etch rates of CoFeB can be obtained by the formation of metal carbonyls during the etching of CoFeB using CO/NH$_3$. However, CO is known to spontaneously decompose into C and CO$_2$ on the surface by the equation:

$$2\text{CO} \rightarrow \text{C} + \text{CO}_2; \quad \Delta H^\circ = -172.5 \text{ kJ/mol}$$

Therefore, by the decomposition of CO into C and CO$_2$, the portion of chemical etching is decreased and the material is etched mostly by physical sputtering, which results in the decrease of the etch rate. The decomposition of CO in the plasma is known to be decreased by the addition of NH$_3$ in the plasma. Therefore, the highest etch rate obtained with the CO/NH$_3$ ratio of 1:3 in Fig. 2b is believed to be related to the abundance of CO on the metal surface, which results in the formation of volatile metal carbonyls. In the case of MgO, even though it is not clear, Mg appears to form volatile metal carbonyls with CO; therefore, a similar increase of the etch rate is expected. Therefore, high etch rates of CoFeB can be obtained by the physical sputtering.

By using CO/NH$_3$ (1:3) instead of Cl$_2$/Ar (2:1) for the etching of CoFeB, even though the CoFeB etch rate is slightly decreased, the etch selectivity over Ti, which is the mask for the MTJ layer, is significantly increased from 0.068 for Cl$_2$/Ar (2:1) to 2.0 for CO/NH$_3$ (1:3) as shown in Fig. 2a and b, respectively. More important factor is the corrosion after the etching of CoFeB. Figure 3 shows the SEM micrographs after the etching using Cl$_2$/Ar (2:1) and CO/NH$_3$ (1:3), respectively. The ICP source power, bias power, operating pressure, and gas flow rate were maintained at 700 W, 500 W, 5 mTorr, and 30 sccm, respectively. The etch time of CoFeB was 1 min. As shown in Fig. 3, for the CoFeB etched by Cl$_2$/Ar, a rough surface caused by the surface corrosion by the remaining Cl$_2$ could be observed as similarly observed by other

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table I. Boiling points of reaction products of Co/Fe/B and Ti with Cl$_2$ and CO/NH$_3$</th>
<th>100 kPa</th>
<th>10 kPa</th>
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<tr>
<td>CO/NH$_3$</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoCO$_3$(CO)$_4$:52°C</td>
<td>CoCl$_2$:1049°C</td>
<td>CoCl$_2$:818°C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fe(CO)$_5$:103°C</td>
<td>FeCl$_2$:1025°C</td>
<td>FeCl$_2$:821°C</td>
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<tr>
<td>B$_2$H$_6$:−92.6°C</td>
<td>BCl$_3$:12.5°C</td>
<td>BCl$_3$:−93°C</td>
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<tr>
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researchers,\textsuperscript{12} while a smooth surface was obtained for the CoFeB etched by CO\textsubscript{2}/NH\textsubscript{3} due to no corrosion behavior. Also, the etch rate of MgO similar to that of CoFeB with CO\textsubscript{2}/NH\textsubscript{3} (1:3) appears to be beneficial in the one step etching of the MTJ layer composed of CoFeB/MgO/CoFeB.

The CoFeB surfaces etched by Cl\textsubscript{2}/Ar (2:1) and CO\textsubscript{2}/NH\textsubscript{3} (1:3) shown in Fig. 3 were further investigated using XPS. Figure 4 shows the XPS narrow scan data of Fe 2p, Co 2p, and B 1s for the CoFeB etched by Cl\textsubscript{2}/Ar (2:1) and CO\textsubscript{2}/NH\textsubscript{3} (1:3). The etch conditions are the same as shown for Fig. 3. The XPS data of Co, Fe, and B for the pristine CoFeB were also taken as references. The etched CoFeB surface was in situ sputtered for XPS depth profiling by Ar\textsuperscript{+} ion gun with the ion energy of 2 kV and the ion current of 2 \( \mu \)A. XPS data were taken again after the sputtering of the surface for 120 s/cycle. For the pristine CoFeB, to expose clean surface, XPS data were taken after the sputtering for 6 min (three cycles). As shown in Fig. 4, the composition ratio of Co: Fe: B for the pristine CoFeB measured by XPS was about 54\%:34\%:12\%. Also, as shown in Fig. 4, on the surface of the CoFeB etched by Cl\textsubscript{2}/Ar, the XPS peaks possibly related to chlorides are observed at 780.5 eV for Co 2p, 711.0 eV for Fe 2p, and 192.6 eV for B 1s because it is known that Co 2p peak related to CoCl\textsubscript{2} is observed at 780–782 eV, Fe 2p peaks related to FeCl\textsubscript{2} and FeCl\textsubscript{3} are observed at 710.6 and 711.3 eV, respectively, and B 1s peak related to BCl\textsubscript{3} are observed at 192.6–192.7 eV.\textsuperscript{18–20} After the sputtering of the etched surface for more than 120 s (one cycle), the peak heights related to chlorides decrease and the peaks related to the metallic binding among Co, Fe, and B emerge at the binding peak energies for the pristine CoFeB, indicating a thick chloride layer on the CoFeB etched by Cl\textsubscript{2}/Ar. However, in the case of the CoFeB etched by CO\textsubscript{2}/NH\textsubscript{3}, the XPS peaks related to the pristine CoFeB were observed even before the sputtering and no other peaks were observed after the sputtering. Therefore, the CoFeB etched by CO\textsubscript{2}/NH\textsubscript{3} showed a clean surface close to that of the pristine CoFeB, while the CoFeB etched by Cl\textsubscript{2}/Ar showed a thick chloride layer on the etched CoFeB surface.

The change of relative CoFeB composition ratio of the etched CoFeB surface as a function of Ar\textsuperscript{+} ion sputter time was measured for the CoFeB samples etched by Cl\textsubscript{2}/Ar and CO\textsubscript{2}/NH\textsubscript{3}, and the results are shown in Fig. 5a for the CoFeB etched by Cl\textsubscript{2}/Ar and in Fig. 5b for the CoFeB etched by CO\textsubscript{2}/NH\textsubscript{3}. The etch conditions were the same as those in Fig. 3. As shown in the figure, in the case of the CoFeB etched by Cl\textsubscript{2}/Ar, the composition ratio of CoFeB has changed significantly by showing boron-rich surface. The boron-rich composition ratio of the CoFeB etched by Cl\textsubscript{2}/Ar remained similar for the sputter time of 360 s, indicating the formation of a thick degraded layer on the surface. However, in the case of the CoFeB etched by CO\textsubscript{2}/NH\textsubscript{3}, the composition ratio of the etched CoFeB was similar to that of the pristine CoFeB and the composition re-

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**Figure 3.** SEM images of CoFeB surface after the etching by Cl\textsubscript{2}/Ar (2:1) and CO\textsubscript{2}/NH\textsubscript{3} (1:3).

**Figure 4.** XPS narrow scan data of Co, Fe, and B on the surface of CoFeB etched with Cl\textsubscript{2}/Ar (2:1) and CO\textsubscript{2}/NH\textsubscript{3} (1:3). XPS narrow scan data of pristine CoFeB is also shown.

**Figure 5.** Reactive atomic percentage of the etched CoFeB measured as a function of Ar\textsuperscript{+} ion sputter time for the CoFeB samples etched by (a) Cl\textsubscript{2}/Ar and (b) CO\textsubscript{2}/NH\textsubscript{3}.
mained similar with the increase of sputter time; therefore, no significant change of the surface composition ratio of the CoFeB occurred by the etching with CO/NH3.

Conclusions

In this study, CoFeB, which is used as the MTJ layer for MRAM, and the other materials such as Ti and MgO related to the MTJ layer were etched using CO/NH3 ICP and the etch characteristics were compared with the CoFeB etched using Cl2/Ar ICP.

When CoFeB was etched using Cl2/Ar ICP, the etch rate of CoFeB increased with the increase of Cl2 percentage in Cl2/Ar possibly due to the formation of more volatile chlorides on the surface; however, the CoFeB etched by Cl2/Ar showed the corrosion on the etched surface, lower etch selectivity to the Ti mask layer by showing etch selectivity of CoFeB to Ti less than 0.1, and a thick degraded surface layer. When CO/NH3 gas mixtures were used, the highest etch rate was obtained at the CO/NH3 gas ratio of 1:3. The highest CoFeB etch rate obtained at the CO/NH3 gas ratio of 1:3 is believed to be related to the prevention of CO decomposition into C and CO2 by the addition of NH3 and the formation of more volatile metal carbonyls. When CO/NH3 gas mixtures were used instead of Cl2/Ar, even though the etch rate is a little lower, no corrosion on the etched surface, higher etch selectivity to Ti close to 2.0, and no formation of noticeable degraded surface layer could be observed. In addition, by using CO/NH3, the MTJ layer can be etched by one step etching by showing the MgO etch rate similar to the etch rate of CoFeB.

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