

Vertical Cavity Surface Emitting Laser for Operation at 1.5 μm with Integral AlGaInAs/InP Bragg mirrors

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ABSTRACT

The design and performance of a low threshold selectively oxidized Vertical Cavity Surface Emitting Laser (VCSEL) fabricated for operation at a wavelength of 1.55 μm is based on III-V quaternary semiconductor alloys and is grown by Molecular Beam Epitaxy technique. The theoretical investigation of the optical properties of the compound semiconductor alloys allows one to select the optimum materials for highly reflective Bragg mirrors. The simulation of the designed VCSEL performance has been carried out by evaluation of the important laser characteristics such as threshold gain, threshold current density and external quantum efficiency.

INTRODUCTION

Compound semiconductor based long wavelength surface emitting lasers are becoming important light sources for large capacity optical communications and optical interconnection systems [1]. Those devices exhibit such advantages as low threshold currents, single mode operation, high coupling efficiencies into optical fiber [2], and high speed modulation [3]. The development of vertical cavity lasers at 1.55 μm has been centered on the investigation of structures and materials for highly reflective Bragg mirrors grown on InP [4], however the best choice for the high quality epitaxial mirrors has not yet been determined. The most commonly used material systems for the Distributed Bragg Reflectors (DBR) are GaInAsP/InP which requires the growth of 50 layer pairs to achieve a reflectivity of 99.9% [5,6,7], and AlGaInAs/AlInAs which requires the growth of 41 pairs for $R=99.9\%$ [8], thus showing the need for very thick structures to obtain high reflectivity Bragg mirrors. Higher refractive index contrast DBRs reported with fewer mirror pairs are based on the AlGaAsSb/AlAsSb material system [9,10]. These Bragg mirrors use only 20 pairs of alternating AlGaAsSb/AlAsSb layers to obtain reflectivity of 99%. However, these structures are easily degraded and are usually difficult to grow [11,12]. We report the design, fabrication and performance of a VCSEL structure for operation at 1.55 μm , consisting of two optimized DBRs and an unstrained MQW active layer, both lattice matched to the InP substrate. Comprehensive investigation of the dielectric constants [13] and energy band gaps [14] of quaternary semiconductor alloys have been utilized to optimize the structure of the vertical cavity surface emitting laser, and to achieve improved performance. As a result of this investigation, two material systems have been selected that are lattice matched to InP substrate and demonstrate the largest contrast between their refractive indices. $\text{Al}_{0.05}\text{Ga}_{0.42}\text{In}_{0.53}\text{As}$ and InP alloys have refractive indices of 3.8 and 3.17, respectively, resulting in refractive index difference of 0.63.

VCSEL DESIGN AND FABRICATION

In order to predict the dielectric constant behavior of the quaternary alloy, we initially consider the energy band gap dependence on the composition of quaternary semiconductor alloys. These results are then used for the calculation of the dielectric constant, which in turn allows us to select the alloys leading to the largest index of refraction contrast ratio. The investigated VCSEL schematically presented in Figure 1, is fabricated on n-type (001) InP substrate and includes two DBRs, cladding layers, unstrained MQW active layer and oxidizing layer where all materials are lattice matched to the substrate.

The MQW structure in the present work grown by molecular beam epitaxy is unstrained and not intentionally doped. The MQW active region lasing at 1.546 μm was theoretically designed and optimized, consisting of eight $\text{Ga}_{0.43}\text{In}_{0.57}\text{As}_{0.92}\text{P}_{0.08}$ wells, 6nm thick, separated by seven $\text{Ga}_{0.23}\text{In}_{0.77}\text{As}_{0.5}\text{P}_{0.5}$ barriers, 9nm thick. The band gaps of the well ($E_g = 0.78\text{eV}$) and barrier ($E_g = 1.0\text{eV}$) layers were optimized to obtain the largest conduction band discontinuity for a sufficient quantum size effect of electrons [16]. The MQW layer was located at the peak of the electric field standing wave in order to achieve matched gain. The active region is spaced by the cladding layers: $\text{Ga}_{0.11}\text{In}_{0.89}\text{As}_{0.24}\text{P}_{0.76}$ and $\text{Ga}_{0.03}\text{In}_{0.97}\text{As}_{0.07}\text{P}_{0.93}$, with energy band gaps 1.2eV and 1.31eV, respectively. The thickness of $\text{Ga}_{0.11}\text{In}_{0.89}\text{As}_{0.24}\text{P}_{0.76}$ top cladding layer is 20nm, and $\text{Ga}_{0.03}\text{In}_{0.97}\text{As}_{0.07}\text{P}_{0.93}$ second top cladding layer is 81.6nm thick. $\text{Ga}_{0.11}\text{In}_{0.89}\text{As}_{0.24}\text{P}_{0.76}$ bottom cladding layer is 70nm thick and $\text{Ga}_{0.03}\text{In}_{0.97}\text{As}_{0.07}\text{P}_{0.93}$ bottom cladding layer is 101.1nm thick.

A single $\text{Al}_{0.22}\text{In}_{0.78}\text{As}_{0.47}\text{P}_{0.53}$ layer, 70nm thick, is introduced as the lowest layer in the p-type DBR next to the cladding layers to be used for selective oxidation in order to improve VCSEL efficiency through selective oxidation formation of an aperture [17]. The insulating buried oxide efficiently confines the charge carriers into the laser active region while the reduced refractive index of the oxide transversely confines the laser emission. In addition, the larger Al mole fraction of this layer results in selectivity for oxidation in comparison with the AlGaInAs of the Bragg layers. The oxidation of $\text{Al}_{0.22}\text{In}_{0.78}\text{As}_{0.47}\text{P}_{0.53}$ layer has been performed in a normal oven with water vapor produced adjacent to the oven at 85 C . The aperture diameter is controlled through the calibration of temperature and oxidation time with aperture diameter. The produced VCSEL core diameter was maintained at $7\mu\text{m}$, using a mesa of $20\text{-}21\mu\text{m}$.

The two Bragg mirrors of the VCSEL structure consist of $\text{Al}_{0.05}\text{Ga}_{0.42}\text{In}_{0.53}\text{As}/\text{InP}$ alternating layers with refractive index difference of 0.63 . The energy bandgaps of $\text{Al}_{0.05}\text{Ga}_{0.42}\text{In}_{0.53}\text{As}$ and InP have been found to be 0.8eV and 1.35eV , and their indices of refraction are 3.8 and 3.17 , respectively. The top p-DBR is designed to be doped with Be at concentrations of about 10^{19}cm^{-3} , and the bottom n-DBR is doped with Si up to $5 \times 10^{18}\text{cm}^{-3}$. The quarter wavelength thicknesses of $\text{Al}_{0.05}\text{Ga}_{0.42}\text{In}_{0.53}\text{As}$ and InP alternating layers for both DBRs have been calculated to be 101.7nm and 121.9nm , respectively. The expected mirror reflectivities are 97% for the top DBR consisting of 16 pairs of $\text{Al}_{0.05}\text{Ga}_{0.42}\text{In}_{0.53}\text{As}/\text{InP}$ layers, and 99.9% for the bottom DBR consisting of 22 pairs.

The p-type interconnect to the p+ DBR layer (AlGaInAs) was InSnO (ITO), which was rf sputter deposited to a thickness of 50nm . The ITO layer was deposited in a ratio of $5:1$ of argon to oxygen at a total pressure of 5mTorr . A 200nm passivation of silicon dioxide was rf sputter deposited in order to dielectrically isolate the mesa structure and to provide some degree of additional sidewall protection. Sidewall coverage was achieved by rotating the wafer during sputter deposition. The contact to the n+ InP substrate was achieved through the sintered AuGeNi at 450C and 3 minutes . It is noted that the mesas were defined by reactive ion etching using a silicon nitride mesa etch mask which encapsulates the top metal contact.

VCSEL SIMULATED PERFORMANCE AND TEST MEASUREMENTS

The simulation of the designed VCSEL performance has been carried out by evaluation of the important laser characteristics such as threshold gain, threshold current density and external quantum efficiency. The material gain g_{th} required to reach threshold and to overcome the absorption losses in the investigated VCSEL was found to be equal to 198.32 cm^{-1} using the following equation (1) [18]:

$$N_w \Gamma_w \xi g_{th} = \alpha + \frac{1}{2L} \ln \frac{1}{R_t R_b} \quad (1)$$

where $N_w=8$ is the number of quantum wells in the active region, $\Gamma_w=0.015$ [19] is the average optical confinement coefficient per quantum well, $R_t=0.97$ and $R_b=0.999$ are the reflectivities of the top and bottom Bragg mirrors, respectively, $L=8949.9\text{nm}$ is the cavity length, and $\xi=2$ [20] is the energy confinement factor or gain enhancement factor where thin active layer is at the maxima of the electric field standing wave. The optical loss, $\alpha=30\text{cm}^{-1}$ [21], includes absorption in the cladding and active layers, and scattering due to defects and inhomogeneities in the lasing medium.

The threshold current density equal to $J_{th} = 707.74\text{ A/cm}^2$ with transparency current density of $J_{tr} = 70.2\text{ A/cm}^2$ [19] was calculated from the exponential dependence of J_{th} , on the device material parameters:

$$J_{th} = \frac{N_w J_{tr}}{\eta_i} \exp \left(\frac{\alpha + \frac{1}{2L} \ln \frac{1}{R_t R_b}}{N_w \Gamma_w \xi g_0} \right) \quad (2)$$

where $\eta_i=0.9$ [20] is the internal quantum efficiency, and $g_0=1575\text{cm}^{-1}$ [22] is the material gain coefficient.

Assuming that VCSEL mesa structure has a diameter of $20\mu\text{m}$, the threshold current would be $I_{th} = 2.2\text{ mA}$. The external quantum efficiency of the structure, η_d , equal to 0.33 , is estimated using equation (3):

$$\eta_d = \eta_i \frac{\ln \frac{I}{\sqrt{R_t R_b}}}{\alpha L + \ln \frac{I}{\sqrt{R_t R_b}}} \quad (3)$$

Experimentally, the average threshold current measured for this design, with a $7\mu\text{m}$ device was 3mA . The comparison of the above parameters and calculations with other reported experimental results for the VCSELs lasing at $1.55\mu\text{m}$ showed that devices with strained MQW perform slightly better than the investigated laser, they have lower threshold current densities and transparency current densities [18,23], but the external quantum efficiencies are about the same as in this work. However, because of the optimization of the quaternary alloy parameters used in the VCSEL design, its characteristics are estimated to be better than other VCSELs with unstrained MQW active regions [19].

Figure 2 shows the light output versus current characteristics for oxidized $20\mu\text{m}$ devices. Most of the devices which operated had threshold current less than 5mA and the average threshold current was 3mA . The threshold voltage was typically lower than 2.0V and the power output exceeded 1mW . The variation of threshold current is probably due to the variation in oxidation from mesa to mesa resulting in a variation of the recombination current component at the sidewall. The laser spectrum from a $7\mu\text{m}$ confined diode shows a single mode of operation at $1.54\mu\text{m}$, very close to the designed value. The single fundamental mode was present at all current levels, and at the Bragg wavelength. The higher order modes have output powers reduced by at least 30-35 db. The intermodal frequency separation was also considered and was found to be 1.5×10^{13} Hz. This intermodal spacing indicates that only one mode will experience the high reflectivity and leads to a single mode oscillation. The oscillation spectrum measured again showed very strong suppression of the higher order modes. The peak wavelength of the spectrum was at 1542 nm with a peak amplitude of -3.5 dBm . These measurements indicate one specific advantage of VCSELs, that of attaining single mode operation without utilizing mode suppression or gain coupling measures.

CONCLUSIONS

The present work demonstrates an effective design, fabrication method and performance of a VCSEL based on the optimization of the important material and laser parameters resulting in an overall reduction of the number of alternating layers used in DBRs as well as achieving a low threshold current values. The significance of the present work is in the state of the art performance of the vertical cavity surface emitting laser at $1.5\mu\text{m}$, minimization of the number of layers to be grown, resulting in an expected reduction of the interface roughness, and, therefore, overall improvement in the device reliability.

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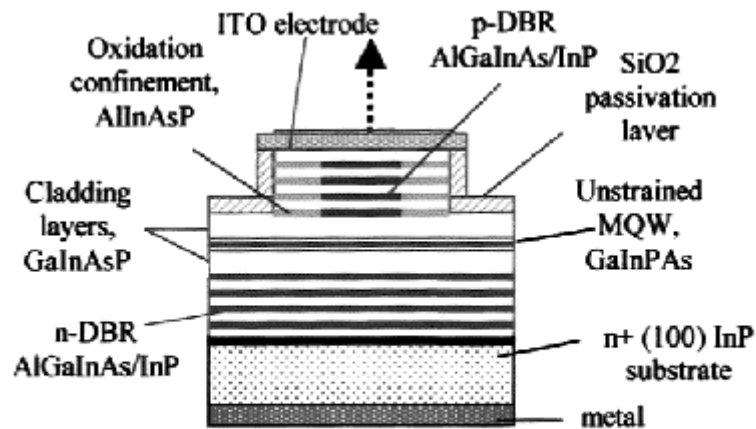


Figure 1. Schematic VCSEL structure.

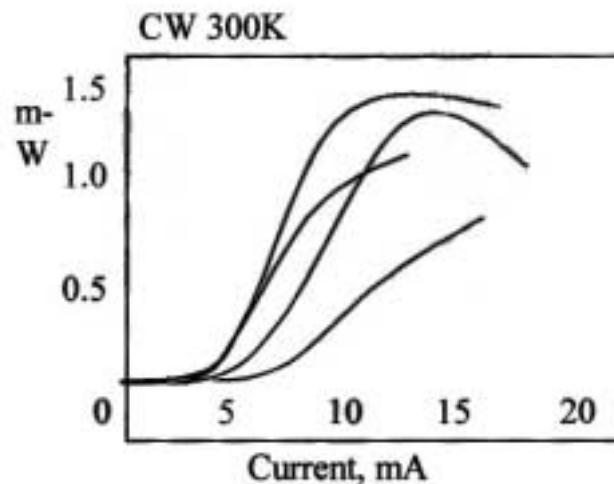


Figure 2. Light output, mW, vs current characteristics for oxidized 20µm devices