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# Study of Cu<sub>2</sub>O/ZnO Nanowires heterojunction designed by combining Electrodeposition and Atomic Layer Deposition

Houssin Makhlouf<sup>1,2,3</sup>, Matthieu Weber<sup>1</sup>, Olfa Messaoudi<sup>2</sup>, Sofie Tingry<sup>1</sup>, Matthieu Moret<sup>4</sup>  
Olivier Briot<sup>4</sup>, Radhouane Chtoutou<sup>2</sup> and Mikhael Bechelany<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Institut Européen des Membranes, UMR 5635 CNRS Université Montpellier 2, Place Eugène Bataillon, F-34095 Montpellier Cedex5, France.

<sup>2</sup>Laboratoire de Nanomatériaux et Systèmes des Energies Renouvelables (LANSER), Centre de Recherches et des Technologies de l'Energie, Technopole Borj Cedria, Bp 95, Hammam-Lif, 2050 Tunis, Tunisia.

<sup>3</sup> Faculté des sciences de Tunis, Université de Tunis, El Manar, 2092 Tunis, Tunisia.

<sup>4</sup> CNRS, Université Montpellier 2, Laboratoire Charles Coulomb UMR 5221, Place Eugène Bataillon, F-34095 Montpellier Cedex 5, France.

## Abstract

Cu<sub>2</sub>O/ZnO nanowires (NWs) heterojunctions were successfully prepared by combining Atomic layer Deposition (ALD) and Electrochemical Deposition (ECD) processes. The crystallinity, morphology and photoconductivity properties of the Cu<sub>2</sub>O/ZnO nanostructures have been investigated. The properties of the Cu<sub>2</sub>O absorber layer and the nanostructured heterojunction were studied in order to understand the mechanisms lying behind the low photoconductivity measured. It has been found that the interface state defects and the high resistivity of Cu<sub>2</sub>O film were limiting the photovoltaic properties of the prepared devices. The understanding presented in this work is expected to enable the optimization of solar cell devices based on Cu<sub>2</sub>O/ZnO nanomaterials and improve their overall performance.

**Keywords:** Cu<sub>2</sub>O/ZnO nanowires heterojunction, Electrochemical Deposition, Atomic Layer Deposition, photovoltaic solar cells.

## 1. Introduction

In the coming years, solar photovoltaic (PV) technologies are expected to grow further and become a major component of the worldwide electricity generation. Nowadays, PV cells are mainly based on silicon, as this leading technology is mature and presents high energy conversion efficiency [1, 2]. Other promising technologies are used and further explored for the development of solar cells, such as Cadmium Telluride (CdTe), Copper Indium Selenide (CIS) and organic materials [3, 4, 5]. Among them, the Cu<sub>2</sub>O/ZnO heterostructure represents a promising candidate, as these oxide materials combination form a low-cost and environment-friendly photovoltaic device. On one hand, Cu<sub>2</sub>O can be used as an absorber material, as it is a semiconductor presenting a band gap of 2 eV and a p-type conduction attributed to Cu vacancies [6]. Besides, Cu<sub>2</sub>O presents a high optical absorption coefficient in the range of  $2 \cdot 10^5$ -  $3.7 \cdot 10^6$  cm<sup>-1</sup> [7]. On the other hand, ZnO is a n type semiconductor characterized by a wide band gap of 3.3 eV, a large exciton binding energy (60 meV) and a high electron mobility ( $120$  cm<sup>2</sup> V<sup>-1</sup> S<sup>-1</sup>) [8]. This n-type semiconductor is able to ensure the efficient charges separation and collection. Several groups have focused their attention on Cu<sub>2</sub>O/ZnO based solar cells, [9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14] and the highest efficiency measured was 1.52% [15]. Therefore, novel manufacturing processes and better understanding of the devices are required to get closer to the theoretical maximum efficiencies.

Cu<sub>2</sub>O/ZnO heterojunction solar cells has been manufactured using different routes, such as the chemical synthesis of a ZnO film on thermally oxidized copper sheets [16], the photochemical deposition of Cu<sub>2</sub>O on a chemically deposited ZnO layer [17] or the sputtering of Al-doped ZnO layer onto electrodeposited Cu<sub>2</sub>O films [9]. Among these methods, electrodeposition is an attractive route, as it is a cost-effective process and as it may offer excellent contact to the absorber film (through a complete filling of physical voids).

The Cu<sub>2</sub>O absorber layer thickness and the geometry of ZnO NWs have an important role on the photovoltaic performances of nanostructured Cu<sub>2</sub>O/ZnO devices. Indeed, the Cu<sub>2</sub>O absorber thickness should be chosen in order to obtain the highest light absorption and photocarrier collection, but a suitable depletion layer should be obtained [18] as the carrier diffusion length in Cu<sub>2</sub>O is typically lower than 1 μm [19, 20]. This diffusion length considerably limits the efficiency of solar cells fabricated with planar films. Therefore, nanostructured cells using ZnO NWs as carrier collectors enable to tackle this issue and to reach considerably higher photocurrents [14].

The formation of a continuous Cu<sub>2</sub>O/ZnO NWs heterojunction is the key to obtain the highest PV performance. Thus, the geometry of the ZnO NWs should be tuned to allow a total coating by the Cu<sub>2</sub>O absorber [9, 13]. Crystalline ZnO NWs can be grown perpendicularly on ZnO seed layers using electrochemical deposition (ECD) processes. This ZnO seed layers is required for the growth of high quality nanowires array, and prevents any contact between the Cu<sub>2</sub>O film and the Indium Tin Oxide (ITO) substrate.

Atomic Layer Deposition (ALD) is a very appropriate technology for the deposition of this ZnO film, as this vapor phase deposition technique allows for the preparation of conformal films with sub-nanometer thickness control [21].

In this work, we report for the first time the combination of scalable ALD and ECD for the preparation of Cu<sub>2</sub>O/ZnO NWs solar cells. ALD has been used to prepare ZnO seed

layers on ITO substrate, and ZnO NWs were grown using a cost-effective electrochemical deposition (ECD) process. Another ECD process was then used to deposit the Cu<sub>2</sub>O absorber within the NWs in order to form the heterojunction. The crystallinity, morphology and photoconductivity properties of the Cu<sub>2</sub>O/ZnO nanostructures are investigated, and the photocurrent response is discussed.

## 2. Materials and Methods

Lactic acid (C<sub>3</sub>H<sub>6</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, 85%), Copper(II) sulfate pentahydrate (CuSO<sub>4</sub>.5H<sub>2</sub>O, 85%), sodium hydroxide (NaOH), Zinc chloride (ZnCl<sub>2</sub>), potassium chloride (KCl) and diethyl zinc (DEZ) (Zn(CH<sub>2</sub>CH<sub>3</sub>)<sub>2</sub>, 95%) were purchased from Sigma Aldrich and used as received. The ITO coated glass substrates were purchased from KINTEC Company, Hong Kong. The initial substrates on which the Cu<sub>2</sub>O/ZnO NWs cells were prepared consisted of a ~120 nm thick ITO layer (resistivity 10 Ω.m) on glass.

Before the Cu<sub>2</sub>O/ZnO NWs heterojunction deposition, the ITO substrates were cleaned using successively acetone and isopropanol in an ultrasonic bath (15 minutes each) and then rinsed with water.

### 2.1. Atomic Layer Deposition of ZnO

The ALD process was performed in order to prepare the ZnO seed layers on ITO glass substrates. ALD of ZnO was carried out in a home-built reactor using sequential exposures of DEZ and H<sub>2</sub>O separated by Argon purge at a substrate temperature of 60°C (at flow rates of 100 sccm). Briefly, the process consisted of 0.2 s pulses and 40 s exposure of DEZ, 60 s of Argon purge followed by 2 s pulse and 40 s exposure of H<sub>2</sub>O, and a final 60 s Argon purge was used to complete the ALD cycle [22, 23]. Using 100, 200 and 300 ALD cycles, we prepared ZnO films of 20, 40 and 60 nm thicknesses, respectively [23, 24, 25].

## 2.2 Electrochemical deposition of ZnO NWs and Cu<sub>2</sub>O

The electrodeposition process was performed in a classical three-electrodes electrochemical cell. First, the ZnO NWs were prepared on the substrates (ZnO ALD films) immersed in an aqueous solution containing  $5 \cdot 10^{-4}$  M and  $1.0 \cdot 10^{-1}$  M ZnCl<sub>2</sub> and KCl, respectively (under continuous bubbling of oxygen) [26, 38, 39, 40]. The electrodeposition was carried out at the fixed potential of -1.0V versus Ag/AgCl using an Autolab PGSTAT30 potentiostat. The deposition time was 150 minutes and the reaction temperature was kept at 80°C [26]. Then, the as-prepared ZnO NWs were annealed for 30 minutes at 400 °C and used as the working electrode.

Next, Cu<sub>2</sub>O has been deposited. The electrochemically synthesis was aimed to fill the gaps between the NWs and to get the absorber layer. The electrodeposition process was carried out for 60 minutes at the constant current of  $-1.0 \text{ mA} \cdot \text{cm}^{-2}$  in 100 ml of aqueous solution containing 0.2 M CuSO<sub>4</sub> and 3 M lactic acid. The electrolyte temperature was kept at 40°C and the pH value of the solution was adjusted to approximately 12.5 by addition of NaOH. Three Cu<sub>2</sub>O/ZnO NWs samples were prepared using the different ZnO seed layers (presenting thicknesses of 20, 40 and 60 nm). Please note that the basic deposition solution at pH 12.5 did not etch the ZnO NWs [14, 19].

Finally, a 200 nm thick gold layer was deposited on the Cu<sub>2</sub>O layer through a shadow mask by direct current sputtering (at a power of 28 W), and the connection was made through an Indium contact deposited on the ITO. The effective area of the heterojunction is 0.5 cm<sup>2</sup>. The schematic representation of the heterojunction cell is given in Figure 1.

### 2.3. Characterization

Morphological properties were investigated by Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) using a HITACHI-S4800. The crystallinity studies have been carried out using X-ray diffraction (XRD) and powder XRD with a PANalytical Xpert-PRO diffractometer (Cu K $\alpha$  radiation). The absorption measurements were performed using a UV/Vis/NIR spectrophotometer (Jasco V-570). I-V curves were measured in order to get a glance on the photovoltaic properties of the Cu<sub>2</sub>O/ZnO heterojunctions. The photovoltaic parameters were evaluated under 1 Sun (AM 1.5 G, 100 mW/cm<sup>2</sup> at 25°C) with a solar simulator (LS0106) connected to a Keithley 2400 Source Meter.

## 3. Results and discussion

### 3.1. Morphology and microstructure

Figure 2 shows SEM images of ZnO NWs and Cu<sub>2</sub>O/ZnO NWs structures with ZnO seed layers presenting different thicknesses, namely 20, 40 and 60 nm. First, as observed on the cross-section views (Figure 2(a), (b) and (c)), the ZnO nanowires presenting diameters of around 60 nm are uniformly and vertically aligned to the substrate. The increase in the NWs average length from L<sub>1</sub>=580 nm, to L<sub>2</sub>=650 nm and L<sub>3</sub>=740 nm is related to the thickness of the seed layer of 20, 40 and 60 nm respectively. The NWs diameter increase with thicker ZnO seed layer was expected, as this observation has been made previously in the literature [41]. However, according to the SEM images (Figure 3S in Supporting Information), we cannot confirm a significant change of the NWs diameter as a function of the seed layer thickness. The absence of a strong dependence of the ZnO NWs diameter and the ZnO seed layer thickness may be due to the small differences between the thicknesses of ZnO seed layer used in this study. The increase in the NWs average length as a function of the seed layer thickness can be explained by the fact that thicker ZnO seed layers enhance the crystal sizes [27] and

decrease the competition of the growth between neighboring NWs. As a result, the vertical alignment was improved and the NWs length increases.

The electrodeposition of  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  on the ZnO NWs seems to enable the preparation of a continuous film on the top of the NWs as depicted in the top view images (figure 2 (d, e, f)).

Besides, no defects such as pinholes or pores could be observed on the top of  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  surface that would prevent the direct contact between Au and ZnO and reduce the leakage current through the heterojunction. Figure 2(g) and Figure 1S (supporting information) enable the comparison of the cross section SEM images of all samples. From Figure 2(g), one can note that the  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  films present approximately the same thickness of  $2.4 \mu\text{m}$  for the three samples. In addition,  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  seems to coat the ZnO NWs conformally and thus to fill the gaps between the nanowires.

Next, XRD measurements were performed to study the crystallinity of the synthesized  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}/\text{ZnO}$  NWs heterostructures. As observed in Figure 3, the diffraction peak at  $2\theta = 34.46^\circ$  corresponds to the (002) crystal plan according to hexagonal ZnO NWs crystalline phase in the three samples. This peak indicates a clear c-axis orientation of the nanowires during ECD process, and it is consistent with JCPDS card (01-080-0074). The intensity of this peak increases gradually when the thickness of ZnO seed layer increases, which may be due to the increase of ZnO NWs length.

In addition to the presence of the ZnO NWs, diffraction peaks at (111), (200) and (220) can be seen. These crystal planes correspond to the cubic phase of  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  (JCPDS: 01-078-2076). The strong intensity of the (111) peak compared to the others peaks indicates a preferential growth of the  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  film through the (111) direction, which can be controlled by varying the pH of the electrochemical solution [9, 28]. The growth of  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  with this preferential orientation on the top of ZnO NWs with the c-axis orientation leads indeed to a good crystallographic



matching [15]. Finally, the characteristic peaks of Cu and CuO are not observed suggesting that no metallic oxide phase was formed during the electrodeposition process of Cu<sub>2</sub>O.

The average grain size dimensions of Cu<sub>2</sub>O films along (111) planes were calculated using the Debye–Scherrer relation. The calculated values were found to be 74.2 nm, 69.3 nm and 43.4 nm for ZnO seed layers of 20, 40 and 60 nm, respectively. The decrease of the grain size is likely to be related to the microstrain developed in the Cu<sub>2</sub>O film during the electrodeposition process. The microstrain  $\varepsilon$  was calculated using the formula below [42]

$$\varepsilon = \frac{\beta}{4 \tan \theta} \quad (1)$$

It has been found that the calculated values of the microstrain increase for thicker ZnO seed layers ( $1.65 \times 10^{-3}$ ,  $1.94 \times 10^{-3}$  and  $3.13 \times 10^{-3}$  for 20, 40 and 60 nm, respectively).

This increase of the  $\varepsilon$  confirms the presence of a significant contraction on the Cu<sub>2</sub>O film electrodeposited on the top of the most vertical aligned NWs. Thus, the grain size decreases when the ZnO NWs length increases.

### 3.2. Optical analysis

To evaluate the band edge of Cu<sub>2</sub>O/ZnO NWs, optical absorption measurements were performed and compared to the absorption spectra of a Cu<sub>2</sub>O film prepared by ECD process on ITO substrate (Figure 4). All Cu<sub>2</sub>O/ZnO NWs samples are characterized by a similar strong absorption, which reaches a maximum value at 74% of the incident light, and by an absorption edge detected at 600 nm. Similar features are observed for the Cu<sub>2</sub>O film that correspond to the excitonic band gap of Cu<sub>2</sub>O, suggesting that no trace amount of Cu<sup>2+</sup> impurities was incorporated in the Cu<sub>2</sub>O film during the ECD process [29]. One can note the absence of the absorption edge of the excitonic band gap of ZnO NWs, which might be due to the strong absorption of the Cu<sub>2</sub>O layer.

The fluctuations in the absorbance, detected at wavelengths lower than the absorption edge, suggest interferences oscillations that may be linked to the formation of a continuous Cu<sub>2</sub>O thin film with a smooth surface. To calculate the Cu<sub>2</sub>O film band gaps, we used the Tauc formula [30]:

$$(\alpha E)^2 = (E - E_g) \quad (E = h\nu) \quad (2)$$

Where  $\alpha$  is the absorption coefficient. The results of  $(\alpha h\nu)^2$  versus  $h\nu$  are given in the supporting information (Figure S2).

The values of the band gap energies of Cu<sub>2</sub>O for the different samples measured are estimated at 2eV (close to the theoretical 2.05 eV) [11, 12, 31]. We can assume that Cu<sub>2</sub>O in all the samples have the same band gap energy value of 2 eV, since the electrodeposition time of Cu<sub>2</sub>O film was kept constant for all samples, resulting in similar thicknesses and strain.

### 3.3. I-V analysis

Figure 5(A) shows the dark current-voltage (I-V) curve of the Cu<sub>2</sub>O/ZnO NWs structure with various thicknesses of the ZnO seed layer. We observe a current rectification behavior confirming that a p-n heterojunction (core-shell) nanostructure is formed. Besides, high leakage-current at voltages less than 0 V appears.

The rectification behavior of Cu<sub>2</sub>O/ZnO NWs heterojunction was estimated by applying a bias ranging from -0.5 V to +0.5 V to the samples. It was found a rectification ratio of 2.9, 2.0 and 1.8 for Cu<sub>2</sub>O/ZnO NWs/ZnO<sub>ALD</sub> 20 nm, Cu<sub>2</sub>O/ZnO NWs/ZnO<sub>ALD</sub> 40 nm and Cu<sub>2</sub>O/ZnO NWs/ZnO<sub>ALD</sub> 60 nm, respectively. Figure 5(B) depicts the I-V characteristics under illumination of the different samples and their photovoltaic parameters are listed in Table 1. The open circuit voltage (V<sub>oc</sub>), the short circuit current density (J<sub>sc</sub>) and the fill factor exhibit low values, whereas, the series resistances (R<sub>s</sub>), which mainly depend on the resistivity of Cu<sub>2</sub>O film remain extremely high. The high R<sub>s</sub> of these structures was probably due to the

small Cu<sub>2</sub>O grain sizes (from 43 to 74 nm) that may introduce grain boundaries on the film and increase the possible recombination rate of the photogenerated carriers. We suggest that ECD of Cu<sub>2</sub>O resulted in the formation of a resistive film. In addition, the extremely low J<sub>sc</sub> and low F.F values may confirm the high resistivity of Cu<sub>2</sub>O film.

The Voc is reported to be highly dependent on the Cu<sub>2</sub>O film thickness, due to improved light absorption and presumably due to a change in the crystal defect concentration with increasing thicknesses. The Voc is highly dependent on the interface state densities [18] but it is not affected by the NWs length [19].

### **Influence of the thickness of Cu<sub>2</sub>O film on photovoltaic parameters**

The absorber layer is a key factor to obtain the desired good photovoltaic parameters. We believe the electrodeposition of an appropriate thickness of Cu<sub>2</sub>O film may lead to the proper light absorption and to high values of Voc and I<sub>cc</sub>.

When Cu<sub>2</sub>O/ZnO NWs heterojunction is formed, a wide depletion zone is created due to the low doping level in Cu<sub>2</sub>O. If the Cu<sub>2</sub>O thickness is insufficient, the Voc value is considerably hindered. Musselman *et al.* calculated the thickness of Cu<sub>2</sub>O film necessary to reach a suitable value of Voc (in the range of 0.4 to 0.7 V) by resolving Poisson's equation at the heterointerface. It was found that a tap thickness between 2.3 and 3 μm was necessary [19]. Thus, it was expected that for a 2.4 μm Cu<sub>2</sub>O thickness used in our samples, a reasonable Voc would be obtained. In our case, low Voc (approx. 0.06V) were obtained, despite the Cu<sub>2</sub>O layer of 2.4 μm thickness. Consequently, other mechanisms taking place in the nanomaterials are linked to these low values, such as traps and recombination centers in the Cu<sub>2</sub>O material.

### **Influence of Interface state on photovoltaic parameters**

To improve the photovoltaic parameters, the architecture of Cu<sub>2</sub>O/ZnO NWs must present good crystallographic qualities with a minimum of local shuntings and grain boundaries to reduce recombination at the interfaces. SEM images indicate that the electrodeposition of Cu<sub>2</sub>O film fills the spaces between nanowires with a good conformality and achieves good crystallographic qualities of the Cu<sub>2</sub>O/ZnO NWs heterojunction.

However, it is not easy to achieve a good heterojunction because ZnO and Cu<sub>2</sub>O crystal faces contain different atomic arrangements. These differences introduce a significant number of defects at the interface states. Interface states can influence the built-in potential of the heterojunction and hence its photovoltaic properties [32, 33, 34].

To confirm the presence of interface states, we calculated the lattice mismatch given by the relation:

$$\Delta a = \frac{2(a_2 - a_1)}{a_2 + a_1} \quad [33].$$

Where  $a_1$ ,  $a_2$  are the lattice constant of ZnO and Cu<sub>2</sub>O respectively ( $a_1 = 3.25 \text{ \AA}$ ,  $a_2 = 4.25 \text{ \AA}$ ). The lattice mismatch between Cu<sub>2</sub>O (111) and ZnO (002) was 27.1%. This large value therefore induces a significant number of defects at the interface. Most of V<sub>bi</sub> can have been formed in Cu<sub>2</sub>O due to the low doping level obtained in the electrodeposition process. The doping values are  $10^{12} - 10^{14} \text{ cm}^{-3}$  [8, 35, 36], significantly lower than the ZnO carrier concentration ( $10^{18} \text{ cm}^{-3}$ ) [11, 37].

The defects existing in the interface states reduce the value of V<sub>bi</sub>, and a drastic reduction of V<sub>oc</sub> value is therefore expected as well. Thus, holes can easily cross the barrier to recombine with a trapped electron at an interface state, resulting in charge carrier collection decrease and a significant decrease of the photovoltaic parameters.

The lattice mismatch and our PV parameters measurements suggest the presence of a large number of defects at interface states. In fact, dark J–V curves for the three samples presented higher reverse-bias leakage currents which resulted in current flow across the

Cu<sub>2</sub>O/ZnO heterojunctions. We believe that a high resistivity of Cu<sub>2</sub>O film and the interface recombinations are responsible for the low photovoltaic parameters measured. It was expected that the large amount of light absorbed through the NW heterojunction would induce a much larger amount of charge carrier generation.

Indeed, better photon absorption phenomenon did not translate into a good collection of charge because of the unbalance between the optimum thickness for a good optical absorption of light in the collection region (lower than 1 μm) and the optimum Cu<sub>2</sub>O film thickness necessary to achieve a fully developed depletion zone (space charge region, generally above 2 μm). Therefore, more investigations must be carried out in order to find the appropriate balance between these two phenomena. In addition, other factors not studied here, such as electrolyte composition and deposition time should be taken into consideration in the future to better understand their effects. We believe these research efforts will help to minimize the interface states and enhance the electrical properties of the Cu<sub>2</sub>O oxide layer.

## **Conclusion**

This study brought insights on the synthesis and characterization of Cu<sub>2</sub>O/ZnO NWs heterojunctions prepared using Atomic layer Deposition (ALD) and Electrochemical Deposition (ECD) processes. ALD has been used to deposit ZnO seed layers on ITO substrates, whereas ZnO NWs have been grown using a cost-effective ECD process. Another ECD process was then used to deposit the Cu<sub>2</sub>O absorber within the NWs in order to form the heterojunction. The crystallinity, morphology and photoconductivity properties of the Cu<sub>2</sub>O/ZnO nanostructures were investigated, and the measurements carried out confirmed the good crystallography properties of the oxide layers. A large light absorption in the Cu<sub>2</sub>O material has been confirmed, and the bandgap of the Cu<sub>2</sub>O absorber has been estimated at 2 eV. The photovoltaic behavior of such heterojunctions was also examined under AM 1.5 G and

under dark using I-V curves. A current rectification behavior has been observed, but the photovoltaic parameters, such as the  $V_{oc}$ ,  $J_{sc}$  and FF exhibited low values. We believe that the high density of interface states and the high resistivity of  $Cu_2O$  film were the main reason of the limitation of these parameters. Although further research efforts are necessary in order to decrease interfacial recombinations and to improve the electrical properties of the  $Cu_2O$  films, the understanding presented in this work is expected to enable the optimization of solar cell devices based on  $Cu_2O/ZnO$  nanomaterials.

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