

EFFECT OF CONSTANT ELECTRIC FIELD ON THE ELECTRONIC STATES IN GRADED-GAP QUANTUM WELLS

Adelina Miteva¹, Stoyan Vlaev²

¹Space Research Institute - Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

²Unidad Académica de Física, Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas,
Carretera Solidaridad Esquina con Paseo La Bufa, Zacatecas 98060, ZAC., México
e-mail: admiteva@phys.bas.bg

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Abstract: Investigation of the electric-field dependence of electronic and optical properties in semiconductor nanostructures (quantum wells) is of great interest due to the possibility of making various fast electro-optical devices. In this work we study in detail the influence of the longitudinal constant electric field on the energy values of a digital quantum well $Al_xGa_{1-x}As/GaAs$ structure and its equivalent graded-composition analog quantum well. We calculate the energies of the electron and hole bound states, the energies of the main optical transitions and their Stark shifts. The spatial distributions of the main electronic and hole states at various given values of the applied electric field are also calculated. The semi-empirical tight-binding approximation in the spin dependent sp^3s^* basis is used and is carried out by surface Green function matching employing an algorithm previously developed and used to study inhomogeneous systems. The aim of these calculations is to find out in detail to what extent these two structures have similar or different properties in the presence of an applied electric field. We compare our results with the results for conventional rectangular quantum well and with experimental data for quantum wells with similar parameters.

ВЛИЯНИЕ ПОСТОЯННОГО ЭЛЕКТРИЧЕСКОГО ПОЛЯ НА ЭЛЕКТРОННЫЕ СОСТОЯНИЯ КВАНТОВЫХ ЯМ ПЕРЕМЕННОГО ХИМИЧЕСКОГО СОСТАВА

Аделина Митева¹, Стоян Влаев²

¹Институт космических исследований - Болгарская академия наук, София, БОЛГАРИЯ

²Автономный Университет Закатекас, Zacatecas, MÉXICO
Электронная почта: admiteva@phys.bas.bg

Ключевые слова: квантово-размерный эффект Штарка, полупроводниковые квантовые ямы, AlGaAs, метод сильной связи.

Аннотация: Исследование влияния электрического поля на электронные и оптические свойства полупроводниковых наноструктур (квантовых ям) представляет большой интерес в связи с возможностью изготовления различных быстрых электро-оптических приборов. В данной работе мы подробно изучаем влияние постоянного продольного электрического поля на значения энергий двух структур: цифровой квантовой ямы $Al_xGa_{1-x}As/GaAs$ и ее эквивалентной аналоговой квантовой ямы. Мы рассчитали энергии связанных состояний электронов и дырок, энергии основных оптических переходов и их Штарк сдвиги. Пространственное распределение основных электронных и дырочных состояний при наложении различных заданных значений приложенного электрического поля также рассчитываются. Используется полуэмпирическое приближение сильной связи в зависящем от спина базисе sp^3s^* и осуществляется шивание поверхностей методом функций Грина с использованием алгоритма, разработанного ранее, и используемого для изучения неоднородных систем. Цель этих расчетов узнать подробнее, в какой степени эти две структуры имеют схожие или различные свойства в присутствии приложенного электрического поля. Мы сравниваем наши результаты с результатами для обычной прямоугольной квантовой ямы и с экспериментальными данными для квантовых ям с аналогичными параметрами.

S.J.Vlaev was Professor at Unidad Académica de Física, Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas, Zacatecas, México. During the final revision of this paper, Prof. Vlaev died on 14 November 2009.

Introduction

Semiconductor nanostructures (superlattices and quantum wells) are already employed in electronic and optoelectronic devices. Many semiconductor devices with built-in quantum wells work under application of an electric field [1,2]. In semiconductor quantum wells (QWs), sharp excitonic absorption peaks are clearly observed even at room temperature. When an electric field is applied perpendicular to the QW layers, the energy of the fundamental absorption edge shifts by a large amount without severe broadening of the exciton resonance. This is the well-known quantum confined Stark effect (QCSE). These properties enable one to utilize QWs for high-performance room temperature optoelectronic devices. Moreover, to improve the performance of these optical devices, band structure modifications in QWs have also been investigated. The electric field effects (Stark effects) on the graded-gap QW structures, where the band gap of the well is inclined along the growth direction, are one of the most promising among the modifications for applications of making various fast optoelectronic devices [1-4]. The modification of the well potential shape can create different optical properties and thus optimize nanostructure-based devices compared to conventional rectangular QWs (RQWs).

In this paper we present a realistic tight-binding (TB) numerical calculation of the energy values for the main bound electronic and hole states as well as their spatial distributions in graded-gap QWs of two different types – analog (AQW) and digital (DQW) without and under application of a constant electric field. AQWs are realized by the analog alloy method by varying the alloy composition linearly in the AlGaAs well layer, i.e. one growth directly inhomogeneous QWs with different composition profiles. However, with this experimental growth method, it is technically difficult to control the alloy composition precisely in the narrow well region, and there will be some structural non-uniformities among the QW. To solve this problem, an alternative approach called the digital alloy approximation was applied in [5,6]. In this approach a supposedly equivalent QW is growing, where the AQW is being replaced by a sequence of wells and barriers with the same well depth but with a programmed sequence of varying widths. Although analog and digital structures are regarded as equivalent, some doubts have been raised [5-8].

The aim of the present work is to explore this issue further in terms of a realistic model, which allows one to calculate not only average properties but also detailed features. A comparative study will be carried out of the two structures shown in Fig. 1 as a practical example of analog versus digital QWs under an applied electric field.

Model and Method

We study $\text{Al}_x\text{Ga}_{1-x}\text{As}/\text{AlAs}$ QWs with the graded-gap well structures (Fig. 1). The external constant electric field F is applied to the QWs parallel to the growth axis [001]. Similar structure is partially investigated experimentally and theoretically in [5-7]. Theoretical works about the electric field effect in analog and digital QW systems have been done mainly in the effective mass approximation. In the calculations we use the sp^3s^* spin-dependent semi-empirical tight-binding model as it is described in [8,9]. The virtual crystal approximation is used for the description of the TB parameters for the ternary compound. The surface Green function matching technique is developed in [9,10] and is applied for calculating the Green function of the infinite system (AIAs) containing the finite inhomogeneous slab. Here the presence of an external static electric field is defined similarly to [11,12].

The electric field is applied to the structure under study at two points in the barrier regions (AIAs) situated at the distance of 5 monolayers (MLs) from the edges of the graded-gap QWs. The width of both QWs under study is 36 MLs (102 Å). The zero value of the intensity of applied electric field F is defined at the point which corresponds to 5 MLs from the left edge of the QWs. In numerical calculations we use a wide range of electric fields, from -200 to +200 kV/cm with a step of 5 kV/cm. We also made calculations for the conventional rectangular QW (RQW) in order to compare it with our results. The RQW has a 36 MLs (102 Å) GaAs well and AlAs barriers. The calculations are made at the center of the two-dimensional Brillouin zone.

Results

Fig. 2 displays the calculated ground state energies of the conduction $E(\text{C}1)$ and valence $E(\text{HH}1)$, $E(\text{LH}1)$ states in the three QWs versus the applied constant electric field. We notice that the electric field effects are similar, but not equal, for the three QWs under consideration. For the valence states, at the same value of the electric field F , the Stark effects are stronger for the AQW and the DQW, than for the RQW. For the electron energy the tendency is opposite.

Fig. 3 shows the Stark shifts of the main optical transition energy $E(\text{C}1\text{-HH}1)$ from the applied external constant electric field for the three QWs. The Stark shift of the energy is defined as the

absolute value of the difference of this energy at a given electric field minus the value of this energy at field zero. The dependence of the Stark shift for the three QWs is similar. The increase of the field increases the Stark shifts. This increasing is better pronounced for DQW than for AQW, for all values of the field F . This increasing is also better pronounced for RQW than for both DQW and AQW, in the region of large values of the applied electric field. For low electric fields (smaller than ~ 25 kV/cm) the Stark shifts of RQW are smaller than for both DQW and AQW. The conclusion is that DQW structure probably will be applicable to high-speed optical modulators with low driving voltages.

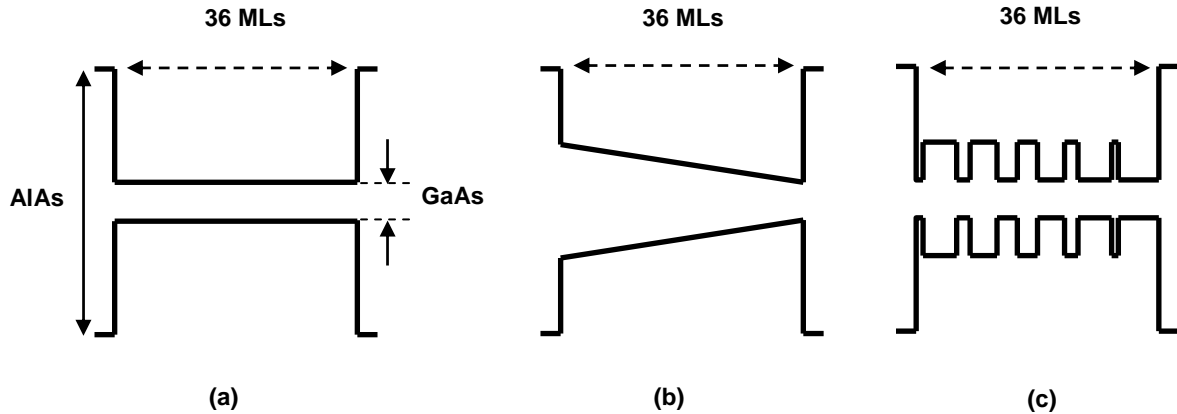


Fig. 1. Schematic band diagram of: (a) conventional rectangular QW (RQW); (b) genuine analog graded-gap QW (AQW); (c) the equivalent digital graded-gap QW (DQW). (a) The alloy composition x of the well is 0, i.e. pure GaAs. (b) The alloy composition of $\text{Al}_x\text{Ga}_{1-x}\text{As}$ in the well varies linearly from $x=0.3$ to $x=0.0$ (from the left to the right side of the QW). (c) The alloy composition x of the inserted $\text{Al}_x\text{Ga}_{1-x}\text{As}$ barrier layers is 0.3, the minimum width of the structure is one monolayer (ML), the composition of the wells of the inserted region is $x=0$. In three cases we have pure AlAs at the barriers.

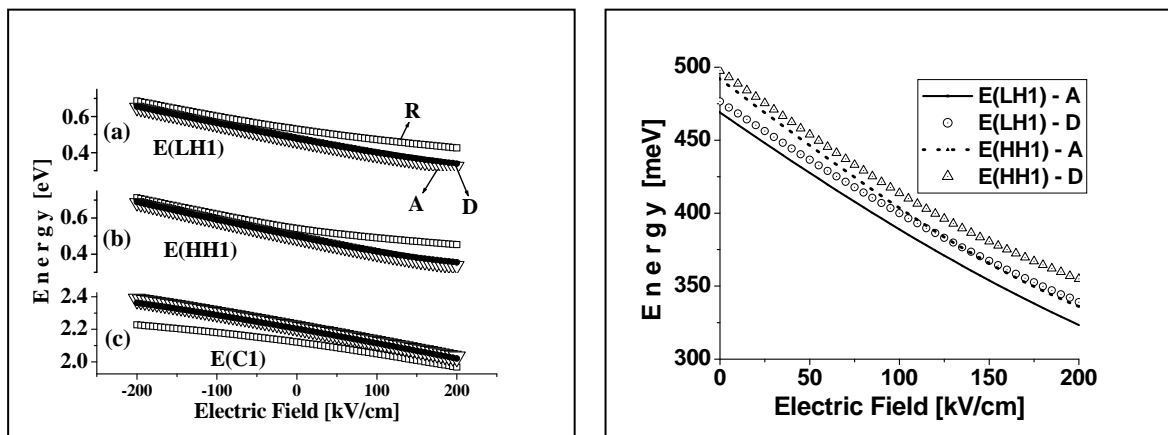


Fig. 2. The dependence of the ground state energies for: (a) – $E(\text{LH1})$ light holes; (b) – $E(\text{HH1})$ heavy holes; (c) – $E(\text{C1})$ electrons, on the applied electric field strength. On the left part of the figure: A (AQW) – triangles, D (DQW) – circles, R (RQW) – squares. On the right part – the same dependence for heavy and light holes, for AQWs and DQWs, as indicated on the figure.

Table 1 gives some differences of the Stark shifts measured and calculated for DQW and RQW in [5] (see Fig. 3, [5]). These results are compared with the calculated here results with the tight-binding model described above. The calculation in [5] was done in the effective mass approximation. The experimental data for the Stark shifts in [5] were obtained by absorption current spectroscopy method. The discrepancies are likely due to the difference between real and ideal DQW structures. However, the calculated values are for the ideal QW, which actually differs from that of the measured composition profile. Here the Stark shift energies were calculated not at room temperature but at temperature $T=0\text{K}$. That is the exciton effects are not included in the calculations.

The results of the total spectral strength spatial distributions are depicted in Fig. 4. The applied electric field intensity F is -100 kV/cm. For the three QWs there is a complete overlap of the spatial

distributions at $F=0$. A displacement of the spatial distributions of C1, HH1 and LH1 states appears at electric field $F \neq 0$. It is larger for analog and digital QWs than for rectangular QW. In the DQW case some features begin to emerge and reflect its multiwell structure [8]. This type of behavior, of course, never appears in an AQW.

Table 1. A comparison of the calculated values with the calculated and experimental values from the literature [5] for the Stark shifts (in meV) of E(C1-HH1) for AQWs, DQWs and RQWs. The applied electric field F intensity is given in kV/cm.

Electric field F , [kV/cm]	Stark shift of E(C1-HH1), [meV]						
	RQW			DQW			AQW
	This work	[5]		This work	[5]		This work
		Theor.	Exp.		Theor.	Exp.	
50	5,7	4		2,9	7,5		2,2
100	20,3	14		8,9	18,2		6,9
20	0,8		0,38	0,8			0,6
25	1,5		0,85	1,1			0,9
35	2,9		1,3	1,7			1,4
10	0,1			0,4		0,9	0,3
60	8			3,8		9,4	3
90	16,9			7,4		13	5,8

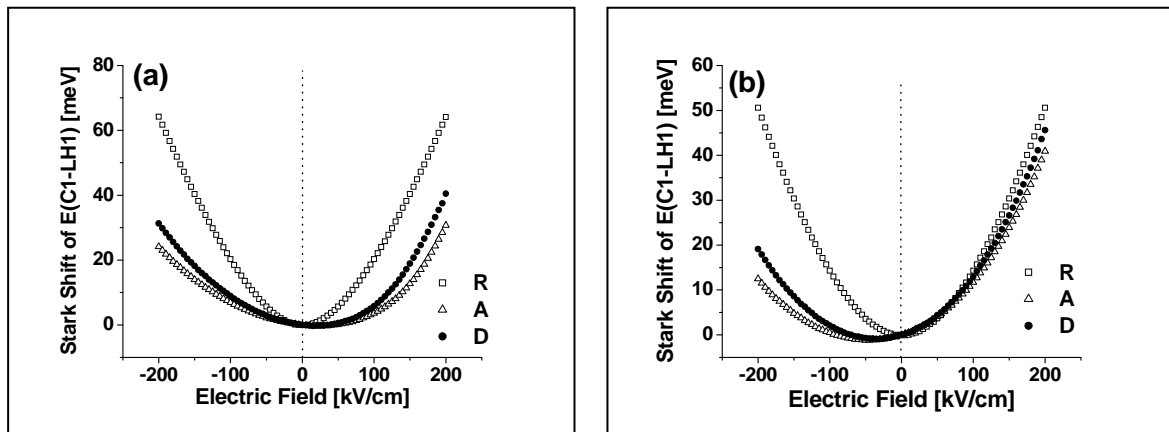


Fig. 3. The Stark shifts of the main transition energies: (a) energy shift of E(C1-HH1) and (b) the same for the energy E(C1-LH1); A (AQW) – triangles, D (DQW) – circles, R (RQW) – squares.

Similar results concerning the calculation of the ground state energies of the conduction E(C1) and valence E(HH1), E(LH1) states in three QWs in dependence of applied constant electric field F were already published and discussed in [6,7].

Concluding remarks

The real purpose of this calculation is to make a detailed comparative study of the AQW and DQW structures in the presence of applied electric field. We also would like to demonstrate the practical use of the applied calculation method. Although the two QW structures are considered as equivalent, there is lack of detailed investigation on this issue. Our calculations allow a detailed electronic structure investigation of AQWs and DQWs in the presence of a constant electric field. On the basis of a realistic model calculation, we show that even in the Stark shifts of the main electronic energies there are some small differences in the AQW and DQW [6,7]. Nevertheless the energy eigenvalues of these two QWs are quite similar they have some different properties [6,7]. We find also differences in the spatial distributions of the electron and hole spectral strength for these two QWs. In the case of DQW, its multiwell nature becomes quite obvious.

The actual composition profiles experimentally obtained may differ significantly from those of the ideal DQW structure. Then a more realistic calculation would require taking account of the

measured composition profile. With the method used here there would be no difficulty in taking in full account of any details of a realistic model that one might want to study. The work is in progress in this direction.

Such investigations will help to find a QW potential profile with better Stark effect characteristics. The investigation of the electric field effects on the optical properties of the QW structures with graded-gap potential profiles is essential for the optimization of QW-based devices.

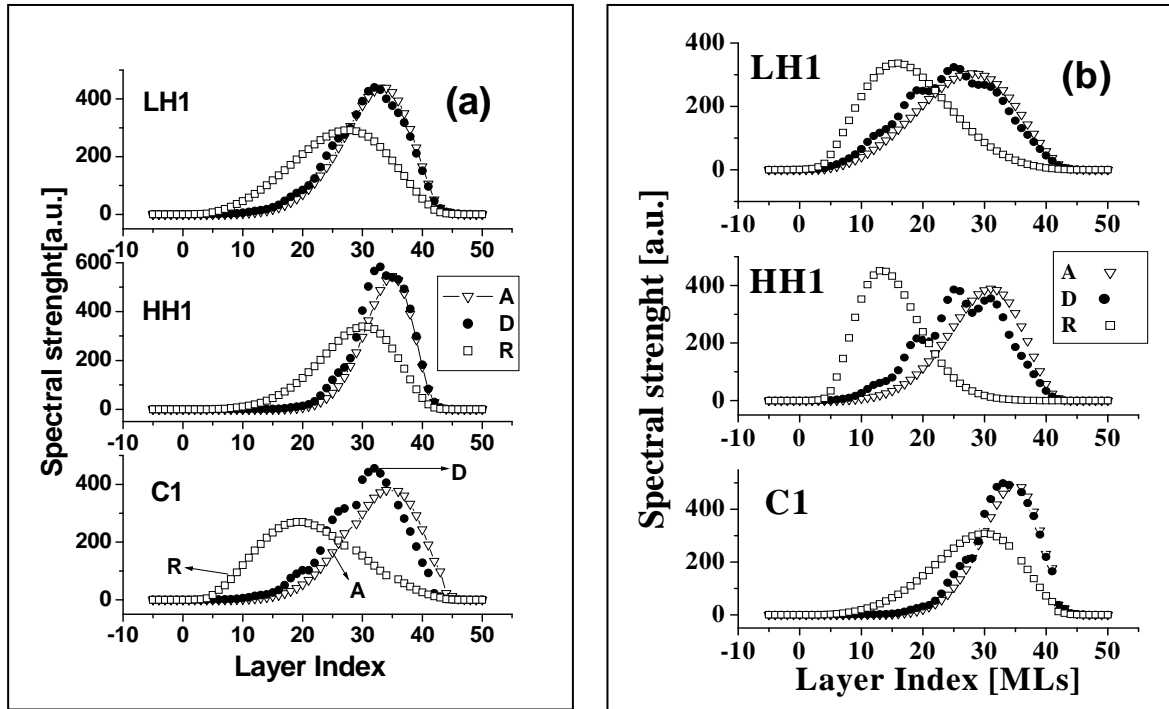


Fig. 4. Spatial distributions of the total spectral strength for C1, HH1 and LH1 states in A (AQW) – triangles, D (DQW) – circles, R (RQW) – squares. The electric field intensity is: $F = -50$ kV/cm in Fig. 4(a) and $F = -100$ kV/cm in Fig. 4(b).

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