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Analysis of electro-chemical RAM synaptic array for energy-efficient weight update

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While electro-chemical RAM (ECRAM)-based cross-point synaptic arrays are considered to be promising candidates for energy-efficient neural network computational hardware, array-level analyses to achieve energy-efficient update operations have not yet been performed. In this work, we fabricated $\text{CuO}_x/\text{HfO}_x/\text{WO}_x$ ECRAM arrays and demonstrated linear and symmetrical weight update capabilities in both fully parallel and sequential update operations. Based on the experimental measurements, we showed that the source-drain leakage current (I_{SD}) through the unselected ECRAM cells and resultant energy consumption—which had been neglected thus far—contributed a large portion to the total update energy. We showed that both device engineering to reduce I_{SD} and the selection of an update scheme—for example, column-by-column—that avoided I_{SD} intervention *via* unselected cells were key to enable energy-efficient neuromorphic computing.

KEYWORDS

neuromorphic system, synaptic device, ECRAM array, weight update, energy consumption

Introduction

Neuromorphic systems employing artificial neural networks with synaptic weights (w) have been considered a breakthrough technology enabling energy-efficient computing in the big data era (Mead, 1990), (Roy et al., 2019). To represent w using emerging memories (Burr et al., 2017), filamentary resistive RAM (RRAM) (Woo et al., 2016), (Yao et al., 2020) and electro-chemical RAM (ECRAM) (Fuller et al., 2017; Tang et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2019) have been actively studied due to analogously modulated multilevel resistance states, as shown in Table 1. Significant advances have been made in neuromorphic hardware chips based on the RRAM for pattern recognition of Modified National Institute of Standards and Technology (MNIST) dataset. However, the abrupt formation of filament with the stochastic nature of ion motion causes non-linear weight updates, degrading recognition accuracy (Woo et al., 2016). In this regard, the ECRAM, which is beneficial for achieving the linear and symmetrical weight update characteristics, which are key metrics for accelerating neural network training (Woo and Yu, 2018), has recently attracted great attention. This is because field-driven ion migration across the gate and channel in ECRAM analogously tunes the lateral

TABLE 1 Benchmark table showing synaptic update metrics for filamentary RRAM and ECRAM devices.

	Filamentary RRAM		ECRAM	
	Woo et al. (2016)	Yao et al. (2020)	Tang et al. (2018)	Kim et al. (2019)
Structure (from top to bottom)	TiN/Ti/HfO ₂ /Al	TiN/TaO _x /HfO _x /TiN	LiPON/WO ₃	MO/HfO ₂ /WO ₃
# of states	40	32	50	20
Linearity	0.59/−0.01	—	0.56/−0.48	0.01/−0.91
Conductance range	20–60 μS	2–20 μS	0–24 nS	2–16 μS
E consumption	—	~10 fJ	~1 fJ	~100 fJ
Accuracy (dataset)	~90% (MNIST)	~96% (MNIST)	~96% (MNIST)	~95% (MNIST)

channel current (I_{SD}) between the source and drain corresponding to the w . When a positive voltage is applied to the gate, mobile ions provided from an ion reservoir (e.g., gate or electrolyte) migrate towards the channel. The increased I_{SD} indicating potentiation is thus observed, and the degree of change in I_{SD} is controlled by the number of gate voltage pulse. On the other hand, for depression, which means lowering the I_{SD} , a negative voltage applied to the gate attracts the mobile ions from the channel. In particular, a low weight update energy (E) of tens of pJ has been experimentally demonstrated at the unit device level (Burgt et al., 2017), and an ultralow E of approximately 1 fJ can be expected through aggressive device scaling (Tang et al., 2018).

What is often neglected and has not yet been explored is the array E consumption, which considers not only the selected multiple ECRAM cells to be updated, but also the unselected ECRAM cells. Assuming certain three-terminal ECRAMs in the array are selectively updated, the gate-source voltage (V_G) and source-drain voltage (V_D) can be addressed to selected lines simultaneously based on the half-bias scheme (Kim et al., 2019), (Li et al., 2020), (Lee et al., 2021). Depending on the location of the adjacent unselected cells, V_G or V_D can be partially applied, thereby creating additional leakage paths consisting of gate-source current (I_{GS}) or I_{SD} . More importantly, since the ECRAM channel is normally on, the effect of I_{SD} being greater than I_{GS} (Kang and Woo, 2021) should be investigated.

Consequently, the aim of this study is to identify how the I_{SD} is involved in E consumption in a large-sized ECRAM array. Based on experimentally obtained update behaviors in a 2×2 CuO_x/HfO_x/WO_x ECRAM array, we investigated the effect of I_{SD} on array size. Through case studies considering the location of selected ECRAM cells and sequential update (SU) direction, we showed the update method that minimize the involvement of the I_{SD} for energy-efficient neuromorphic computing.

Experiments

For the 2×2 array, four channels with a size of $50 \times 50 \mu\text{m}^2$ were patterned by conventional lithography and lift-off methods.

A 20-nm-thick WO_x channel was deposited by RF sputtering at 50 W power with WO₃ target on top of SiO₂ substrate. For source and drain pads, W layers were formed at both edges of the WO_x channel. Then, an electrolyte and a gate were sequentially deposited in the vertical direction of the WO_x channel to connect each device. A 25-nm-thick HfO_x serving as the electrolyte was deposited by RF sputtering with HfO₂ target with power of 100 W in Ar plasma ambient. To limit the injection of mobile ions, a CuO_x gate electrode formed by RF sputtering on a Cu metal target in Ar:O plasma gas, a ratio of 27:3 being used, as it was found to have been optimal in our previous work (Kang et al., 2022a). The fabricated ECRAM array was characterized using a B1500 semiconductor parameter analyzer and B1530A waveform generator/fast measurement unit.

Results and discussion

Figure 1A represents the schematic diagram of a unit ECRAM device. The I_{SD} of the ECRAM cell was measured by applying a V_D to the drain and grounding the source. To update the I_{SD} in the unit ECRAM cell (Kang et al., 2022b), a V_G of +6 V (or −4 V) was applied for potentiation (or depression), respectively. The optical microscope image of a fabricated 2×2 ECRAM array was shown in Figure 1B. Notably, in the array—since the gate line (G_1) is connected multiple ECRAM cells—the half-bias scheme (Kim et al., 2019), (Li et al., 2020), (Lee et al., 2021) can be exploited to address the full voltage to a selected cell, as well as to deactivate unselected cells. Unlike the unit cell operation, both a V_G of +3 V and a V_D of −3 V were applied to the G_1 and D_1 lines, respectively, as shown in the top of Figure 1C. This induced a total of +6 V as an effective V_G to the selected cell during potentiation. Since the single G_1 line was shared, the connected two cells can be simultaneously updated by applying −3 V to the D_2 line as well. It is defined as a fully parallel update (PU) operation. In the same manner, for depression, a V_G of −2 V and a V_D of +2 V were applied. The effective V_G of −4 V made to reduce the I_{SD} . Note that the reason for using the half-bias scheme is to update only a certain ECRAM cell in the array.

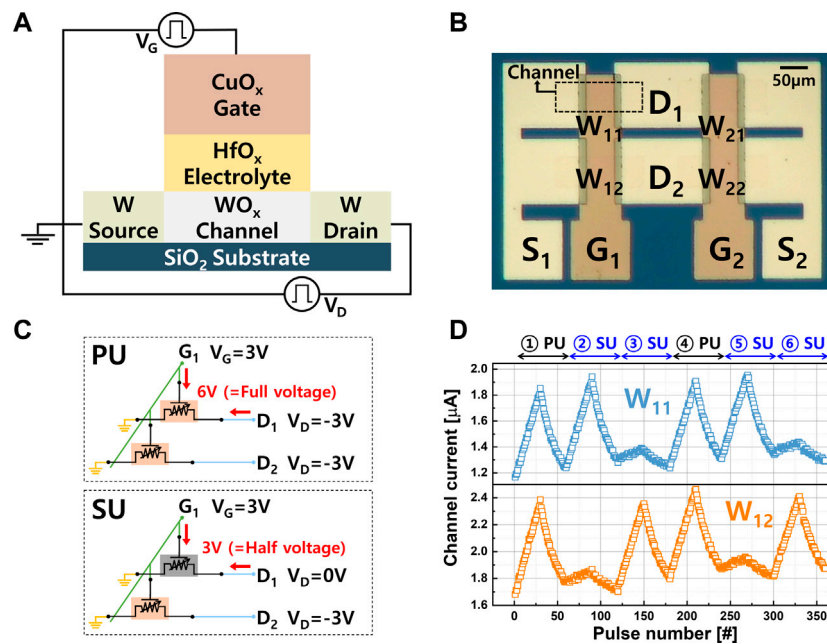


FIGURE 1 (A) Schematic diagram of unit ECRAM device and (B) optical microscopic image of the fabricated 2 × 2 ECRAM array. (C) Half-bias pulse conditions for PU and SU. (D) w_{11} and w_{12} can be simultaneously updated in parallel or sequential fashion.

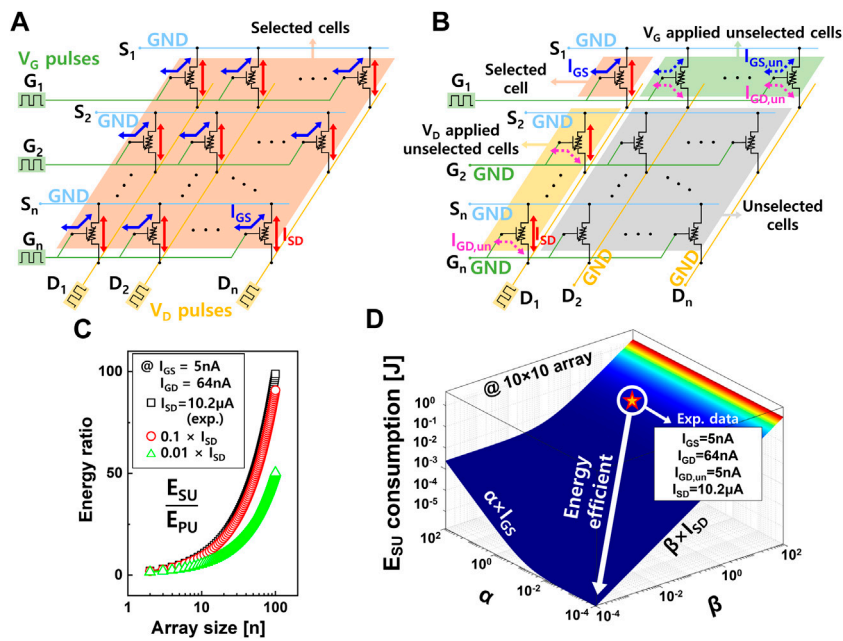


FIGURE 2 The schematic illustrations of (A) PU and (B) SU in $n \times n$ ECRAM array. Unlike the PU operation, where only selected cells are involved, four regimes in the array for SU are classified based on voltage conditions. (C) Calculated E ratio with respect to the array size. The ratio can be minimized by reducing I_{SD} at a given I_{GS} . (D) The three-dimensional plane graph showing E_{SU} as a function of I_{SD} and I_{GS} .

As shown in the bottom of [Figure 1C](#), when 0 V was assigned to the D₁ line, a half voltage of +3 V was induced at the V_G, thereby suppressing the update of the cell due to the insufficient V_G. Multiple ECRAMs can be thus updated cell-by-cell by changing the amplitude of V_D to a specific D line, meaning the SU operation. Based on these measurement conditions, as V_D of -3 V with a pulse width (t_D) of 500 ms was addressed to D₁ and D₂ lines at the given V_G of +3 V with a pulse width (t_G) of 500 ms, the w₁₁ and w₁₂ were linearly updated in real-time ([Figure 1D](#)). Conversely, I_{SD} was steadily decreased during depression, when a V_G of -2 V t_G of 500 ms and a V_D of +2 V with a t_D of 500 ms were successively applied. These resulted in the PU of w₁₁ and w₁₂ for the first 60 pulses. On the other hand, when only w₁₁ was targeted to update, 0 V was applied to the D₂. Since V_G was solely applied to the unselected cell, negligible update of w₁₂ was observed for the next 60 pulses due to insufficient voltage. The reversible PU and SU operations continued to be successfully observed.

We then analyzed the E consumed by each update operation. For ideal PU, all ECRAM cells can be assumed to be updated simultaneously. As V_G and V_D pulses are applied to all lines in parallel, the induced I_{GS} and I_{SD} from selected cells contributed to the E consumption ([Figure 2A](#)). The E consumption of one selected cell (E_{sel}) consists of V_G-related E (E_G) and V_D-related E (E_D), which can be derived by as follows:

$$E_{\text{sel}} = E_G + E_D = V_G I_{GS} t_G + |V_D| I_{SD} t_D \quad (1)$$

For simplicity, the update operation in this study is defined as a change of I_{SD} for potentiation from the pristine ECRAM. An I_{GS} of 64 nA and I_{SD} of 10.2 μA measured at effective full V_G of +6 V and V_D of -3 V were extracted from the experimental data. An E_G and E_D of 192 nJ and 15.3 μJ, respectively, were calculated. For an array size of n×n, the total E of PU (E_{PU}) can be defined by multiplying the E_{sel} by the number of cells (=n²) as follows:

$$E_{\text{PU}} = n^2 \cdot E_{\text{sel}} \quad (2)$$

Conversely, when n² cells were sequentially updated in the array, leakage paths through neighboring cells that are partially biased needed to be considered. Specifically, a V_G of +3 V addressed to the horizontal G₁ line generates leakage sources through n-1 unselected cells in the S₁ row apart from the selected cell, as shown in [Figure 2B](#). These V_G-induced leakage currents sink to the source (I_{GS,un}) and drain (I_{SD,un}) of 5 nA read at a V_G of +3 V, thus inevitably producing E (E_{GS,un}) as follows:

$$E_{G,\text{un}} = V_G I_{GS,\text{un}} t_G + V_G I_{GD,\text{un}} t_G \quad (3)$$

In the case of D₁ column, it is noteworthy that a V_D of -3 V causes I_{SD} through n-1 unselected cells as well as the gate-drain leakage current (I_{GD,un}). The E in the unselected area where V_D is applied (E_{D,un}) can be expressed as follows:

$$E_{D,\text{un}} = V_G I_{GD,\text{un}} t_G + |V_D| I_{SD} t_D \quad (4)$$

The remaining unselected cells can be ignored. Consequently, the E during SU can be derived as follows:

$$E_{\text{SU}} = n^2 \cdot \{E_{\text{sel}} + (n-1) \cdot E_{G,\text{un}} + (n-1) \cdot E_{D,\text{un}}\} \quad (5)$$

The calculations show that the SU compared to PU wastes considerable E due to these additional leakage paths, which is exacerbated in large scale arrays ([Figure 2C](#)). However, during the actual training stage in neuromorphic systems, at the expense of an inefficient E and latency drawback, the SU can be expected to be more frequently conducted rather than PU. To reduce the E during SU, we examined the E consumption by varying I_{SD} of the ECRAM at a given I_G, as shown in [Figure 2C](#). This results in an alleviated E consumption as a function of reduced I_{SD}. It can be further clarified by adjusting both I_{SD} and I_{GS}. As shown in [Figure 2D](#), the E_{SU} is more sensitive to I_{SD} at the given experimental data, where both coefficients of α and β are 1. When β is substantially lowered through design of the ECRAM and its material stack ([Melianas et al., 2022](#)), ([Lee et al., 2022](#)), E_{SU} savings for the 10 × 10 sized array can be achieved.

The impact of I_{SD} and I_{GS,un} (or I_{GD,un}) on the E_{SU} can be found directly by analyzing the weight update with respect to the locations of the selected cells, as shown in [Figures 3A,B](#). In both cases, a single line of n cells is selected, but different types of voltage are applied to the unselected cell regimes (see the “patterned area”). E_{row} and E_{col} can be defined as E when only a certain row and column are updated. For E_{row} (or E_{col}), V_D (or V_G) pulses entering all column (or row) lines cause undesired leakages *via* n(n-1) unselected cells, inducing waste E_{D,un} (or E_{G,un}), respectively. Each E can be thus expressed as follows:

$$E_{\text{row}} = n \cdot E_{\text{sel}} + n(n-1) \cdot E_{D,\text{un}} \quad (6)$$

$$E_{\text{col}} = n \cdot E_{\text{sel}} + n(n-1) \cdot E_{G,\text{un}} \quad (7)$$

As shown in [Figures 3](#), a noticeable E difference (of the order of 10² in the 100 × 100 sized array) can be observed. This can be explained by examining which leakage paths occurring in the unselected area are primarily involved as the array size increases, as shown in [Figure 3D](#). Since the contribution of I_{SD} exponentially increases with respect to the cell numbers for E_{row}, I_{SD} prevails over other leakage components. Conversely, in the case of E_{col}, I_{SD} component is linearly proportional to the array size. Although the I_{SD} seems to be dominantly served as a major leakage component, the impact of the I_{SD} can be minimized for E_{col}. These results imply that the energy efficiency can be enhanced by utilizing update methodologies that suppress the participation of the I_{SD} *via* unselected cells as much as possible.

To identify a preferred update scheme, we conducted a case study, where the selected cells were randomly distributed in a 3 × 3 array, as shown in [Figure 4A](#). The cells can be

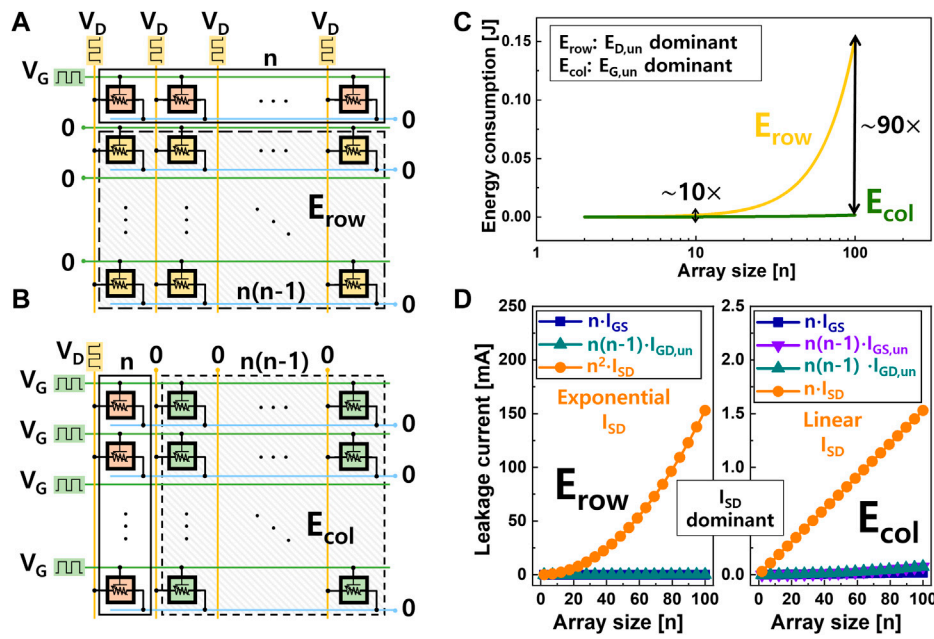


FIGURE 3 Single (A) row or (B) column is updated in the $n \times n$ array. (C) E consumption responds differently to the array size depending on the voltage applied to the unselected cell region. (D) Although I_{SD} is dominant leakage component in both cases, the impact of I_{SD} for E_{row} is substantial.

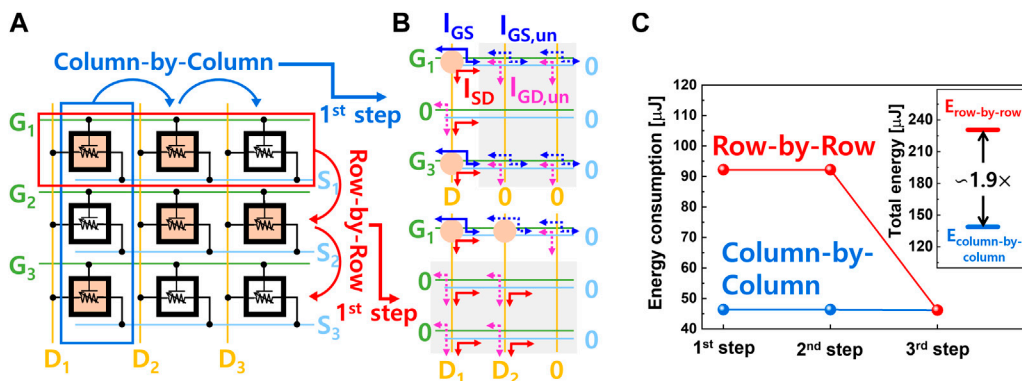


FIGURE 4 (A) 3×3 ECRAM array in which the cells to be updated are randomly distributed for the case study. (B) The leakage current components depending on the update scheme of the first step. (C) Calculated total E consumption for each update direction.

updated in two ways: column-by-column or row-by-row. Three steps of updates were sequentially executed, but different combinations of selected cells and unselected cells were assigned in each step (Figure 4B). Considering the first update step, D_1 solely needed to be activated, while G_1 and G_3 were turned on during column-by-column scheme (top of Figure 4B). Thus, the $I_{G,un}$ was the primary leakage source through the rest of the columns. However, to update the same

number of cells in a row-by-row fashion, G_1 was turned on. Simultaneously, an additional V_D was needed to be addressed through the D_1 and D_2 lines (bottom of Figure 4B). As a result, E loss occurred due to the considerable I_{SD} from the unselected cell areas. When a few cells were updated in a row or column in the array, the E difference depending on the scheme became negligible because the participation of lines that produced leakages was reduced. Consequently, it turned

out that the column-by-column scheme could enable energy efficiency twice as high as that of the row-by-row sequence, as shown in the E calculation with respect to update direction (Figure 4C).

However, as we reported in our previous work (Woo and Yu, 2019), considering the actual array operation, parasitic components such as line resistance began to be involved. Particularly, as interconnect line was aggressively scaled or array sizes were increased, the impact of line resistance on the cell becomes more pronounced. This study based on the fabricated small-sized ECRAM array excluding external factors revealed one of the important leakage current components for a successful weight update operation, so further study is needed to verify the analysis. In this regard, we recently developed an ECRAM model to describe the observed synaptic behavior (Kim et al., 2022). We thus expect to conduct a comprehensive investigation of ECRAM arrays, taking into account non-ideal effects such as device reliability and parasitic resistance (or capacitance) on ECRAM model implemented in SPICE.

Conclusion

We experimentally demonstrated the PU and SU in a 2×2 CuO_x/HfO_x/WO_x ECRAM array. Most studies have reported a low E of the ECRAM unit cell by simply considering the I_{GS} . However, our findings revealed that the inevitable I_{SD} through neighboring cells—which had been neglected in studies to date—plays a crucial role in E consumption at the array-level. This is because V_G and V_D are partially applied to the lines to selectively update specific cells in the array, generating unavoidable leakage sources. It should be noted that since the ECRAM performed normally, the E consumption was more sensitive to I_{SD} . This was further mathematically validated by examining the impact of V_G (or V_D) applied to unselected cells as a function of the array size. The results showed that lowering the I_{SD} of the ECRAM achieved through material and device engineering was the preferred approach. In addition to this ECRAM unit cell point of view, we showed that the SU scheme using a column-by-column approach, in which a smaller $I_{SD,un}$ involvement could be derived using fewer activated column lines, can further reduce E consumption.

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Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary Material; further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

HK experimented and characterized the devices. HK, NK, and SJ performed the calculations. HK, NK, SJ, HWK, EH, SK, and JW discussed the electrical results. SK suggested the guidelines. JW contributed ideas and supervised the study. HK and JW wrote the manuscript.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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