Exhaustivity marking in German and English: A challenge for L2 acquisition?

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This paper explores in how far L2 speakers of English with L1 German can acquire exhaustive interpretations. We tested in a study with a forced-choice answer task, whether highly proficient L2 English speakers with L1 German assign exhaustivity interpretations to the construction in (1). 56 participants with a proficiency level of C1 in English were presented with scenes like the one in (1):

(1) Little Johnny is sitting in front of a bowl of fruits wondering what to pick. Strawberries Johnny likes.

This scene is followed by a forced-choice question of the type exemplified in (2), which allows for three possible answers:

(2) Does Johnny also like bananas?
❏ yes   ❏ no   ❏ don't know

The results from the study clearly indicate that L2 speakers assign an exhaustivity reading only in under 30% of all cases (whereas native speakers assign exhaustive interpretations in almost 80% of all cases). Thus, highly advanced L2 English speakers with L1 German do not assign an exhaustivi-ty interpretation to topicalization structures. This, we argue, is due to the fact that there is never enough evidence to move from the non-exhaustive inter-pretation (2) to the exhaustive interpretation of (2) in the interlanguage. Thus, the V2-movement rule that accompanies the topicalization operation in German is not enough to generate an exhaustive reading in this language. This carries over to the topicalized structure in the interlanguage and thus blocks exhaustive readings there as well.