Many families have made their way to Holyoke from Mexico for a variety of reasons. Upon arrival, many face similar obstacles as language barriers often amplify the culture shock they experience. Time and time again schools have played a helping role as these families adjust to their new setting.

Holyoke has a strong population of people who do not speak English as their primary language. Roughly 20 percent of the population throughout Holyoke and in Re-1J School District speak primarily Spanish.

While English as a second language (ESL) services are now available at Re-1J schools to those who make the move to Holyoke, in the past, immigrants faced the challenges of joining a classroom without much structured help.

Olga Sullivan's family first arrived in Holyoke in 1975. As the oldest of five daughters, she was the first one to enter into schooling in Holyoke. She was in sixth grade back home in Gómez Farías, Chihuahua in Mexico, but was placed in the fourth grade as she spoke no English.

"As far back as I remember, I was the first non-English speaking student in Holyoke," Sullivan said.

She looks back at her first two years in Holyoke with fondness, but acknowledged the challenging aspect of trying to communicate with a classroom full of people who she could not understand and could not understand her. With no ESL program at the time, the bulk of Sullivan's learning of English came from simply being fully immersed in her classroom.

"Because of who I am, I think I like the way I did it because it forced me to learn faster and at a higher rate because I wanted to be part of the class," Sullivan explained.

She says she was lucky that her teacher and her classmates went out of their way to help the new student settle in. Sullivan recalls teachers using labels to help her learn the English words

for several of the items in the class such as desk and clock.

“I went home seeing stickers when I closed my eyes,” Sullivan joked. “I dreamed of stickers for a long time. I would close my eyes and see stickers everywhere.”

Another driving force in her quick adaptation to the new country came from the cultural exchange with students. Other kids often tried to teach her English and she would repeat after them, not really knowing what she was saying.

Sullivan still laughs when thinking about how badly the other kids wanted her to teach them curse words in Spanish. Because she didn’t like cussing, she taught them words like chair, then got a kick out of watching them as they thought they were cursing.

Sullivan says that by sixth grade she was able to speak the language completely. As she grew older, being bilingual often had people seeking her help. She began translating at an early age for her family and her services were soon picked up by others around the community.

When Sullivan was 10 she was helping out at the hospital during child deliveries as a translator. She remembers getting phone calls in the early hours of the morning by police officers to help her translate. She would sometimes be asked to help translate with new families entering into school.

Once she had kids of her own, she again lent a helping hand as she volunteered in the kindergarten classroom because so many kids could not speak English.

Yesenia Bencomo leads a group discussion on a book Monday, Feb. 25 during an ESL class at Holyoke Elementary School. Bencomo, with help from her two aides, helps children who are not quite fluent in English develop reading, writing, speaking and listening skills. The ESL program at the elementary school includes more than 70 students. —Enterprise photo

Yesenia Bencomo, the ESL teacher at Holyoke Elementary School, had a similar experience as Sullivan more than a decade later. Her family first arrived in Holyoke in the late 1980s from El Terrero, Chihuahua.

“People laugh at me when I say this, but I don’t know how I learned English,” Bencomo said.

Bencomo also faced a new class with a sink or swim type of approach to learning the new language. She too still feels gracious for the lengths teachers and students were willing to go to help her feel welcomed, despite no ESL program in place.

Within a year Bencomo says she was performing at third-grade level and higher.

She recalls the experience being an easy, fun time and doesn’t recall anytime where she really felt like she was struggling.

It was almost a decade later before an ESL program began in Holyoke.

During the 1997-98 school year, a part-time ESL teacher was hired by the district. During the 2000-01 school year the elementary school hired the first full-time ESL teacher and added an aide the following year.

The JR/SR high school hired their first full-time ESL teacher in 2005 and added an aide in 2009.

Bencomo has been able to draw from her past to help today's students who are going through the same plight.

Newcomers are worked with extensively for approximately six weeks. These students learn what Bencomo refers to as "survivor's English," which includes some simple key phrases.

They may also be accompanied to class by an aide until they feel more comfortable.

ESL students generally receive about an hour of language specific help each day and spend the rest of the time in their regular classroom to help them ease into the system.

Aside from the academic help Bencomo is able to provide, she also stressed the importance of having Spanish-speaking teachers on hand for non-English speaking students to be able to approach when feeling overwhelmed or struggling.

"Language barriers will shut down these kids," Bencomo explained. "My goal is to always build relationships with newcomers no matter what level of English they are coming in with."

In the eight years since she began as the ESL teacher at the elementary school, Bencomo has noticed a few changes taking place in the ESL department in Holyoke.

The biggest change has been in the numbers. When she first started there were only about 40 ESL students at the elementary level. This year there are 74 students at the grade school and 125 total in Re-1J.

"I think our teachers at the elementary do an amazing job of making sure that things are modified for our kids, making sure that they are meeting their language needs," Bencomo explained.

Over the past three years school staff members have taken part in professional development exercises to better understand how to approach ESL students in the classroom. This is necessary to help ESL students along because there is only one ESL teacher and two ESL aides at the elementary school and one teacher and one aide at HHS.

Students still play a role in the progress new students make. Bencomo believes that although they are less responsible for the learning of a new language, they help foreign students socially.

Holyoke Enterprise February 28, 2013