Dying to Cross: The Worst Immigrant Tragedy in American History


Perhaps you are like me and want to do far more than simply improve students’ reading skills. You want to teach with engaging, relevant texts that will leave you and your students changed and empowered. However, as a teacher of adult English language learners (ELLs), I have found that it is often difficult to find original novels for these students that contain high-interest, nonpatronizing content, yet are accessible for their level of English. Luckily, there is Hampton-Brown’s inZone book series, which supports ELLs in their development of reading skills while providing high-interest topics that are relevant to students’ lives.

InZone books come in a vast array of reading levels and employ a multifaceted approach to providing the support that students need in order to engage in sustained individual reading. Each page includes boldface words and phrases that are explained and defined in simpler terms in footnotes. This feature allows students to effectively build their vocabulary without the interruption of using a dictionary. Additionally, comprehension checks are placed throughout the novels, which encourage the use of reading strategies such as inference, prediction, and asking questions.

Another valuable feature of these books is the student journals that can be downloaded from the publisher’s web site at no cost. The journals provide many writing prompts, discussion questions, graphic organizers, and vocabulary activities that students can use in literature circles, enabling them to become more independent in discussing literature.

Dying to Cross: The Worst Immigrant Tragedy in American History, by award-winning journalist Jorge Ramos, is one inZone book that
proved to be quite effective in my college-level classroom. Most of the students I teach are immigrants to the United States and were immediately interested in the retelling of this true story of a tragedy that claimed the lives of 19 Latin American immigrants. Because the event was widely publicized on Spanish-language television and occurred in Texas in 2003, many students were already familiar with some of the details and assisted in developing other group members’ prior knowledge before reading.

Most immigrant students are extremely interested in and personally connected to the topic of immigration. As this book examines the events that led to the tragedy, it also explores the various factors at play in the operation of illegal immigration. The ideas presented by Ramos and the questions in the student journals facilitated deep critical thinking, and my students discussed and wrote about who should carry the blame for such a tragedy: the governments of the Latin American countries of origin, the strict immigration policies of the United States, coyotes (immigrant smugglers), people in the United States who exploit illegal immigrants in the labor market, the truck driver, or the victims themselves. Students further examined why people take great risks to come to the United States and what might be some ways to prevent future tragedies like the one described in this book.

Because of the high relevance of this issue to the immigrant students’ lives, they read critically, shared personal stories, examined their own beliefs, and engaged in passionate discussions. After reading the novel, one student wrote a composition relating how she identified with the victims of the tragedy and how she was now more determined to help those who, like she had been, were desperate to come to the United States for a better life: “When someone needs our help, remember, we can make the difference! Let’s demonstrate that we can do it and give a hand to whoever needs it in honor of all our brothers QUE MURIERON EN EL INTENTO (That were dying to cross).”

_Dying to Cross_ is not for the teacher who simply wants to teach reading skills and vocabulary development within the protected walls of the classroom. It is for the teacher who dares to teach critical thinking using a relevant, albeit political, social issue and is
not afraid of empowering students to enter the dialogue in order to effect positive social change.

Reviewed by Mary Amanda Stewart
University of North Texas
Denton, Texas, United States