Activating Creativity in Elementary EFL Writing

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Introduction
I served 27 months as an elementary EFL teacher on the island of Pohnpei in the Federated States of Micronesia and found that rote memorization was the dominant teaching strategy. Pohnpeian teachers wanted interactive classrooms that engaged students creatively, but they often lacked the resources or training to create such an environment. The following activities are the product of collaborative efforts with 4th- through 8th-grade Pohnpeian teachers over a two-year period. Activities could be modified for a range of ELL contexts and environments.

Leaf Animals
The most successful creativity-activating projects often involve creative use of free and readily-available resources near the classroom. The 5th-grade activity below, for instance, immediately followed a short reading about animals people often see in the woods. Students gathered leaves, made animals out of them, and then wrote simple sentences about those animals.

Creative Writing Competition
Volunteers on Pohnpei Island enrolled their 6th- through 8th-grade students in an international creative writing competition. After weeks of responding to writing prompts using creative essays, roughly 500 students submitted entries to a panel of local judges.

Leaf Animals activity:
If you made a new animal, what wouldn’t be the same?
If it made a new animal, it would be the same with a mouth of sticky, its teeth would be like its face.
Tō olō, nov menu od a nek am.

Locally winning papers were typed and sent on to the international competition, with one Micronesian student winning third place internationally. Students were thrilled to participate in the creative writing competition, and schools are participating again this year.

Storybooks
Storybooks can be a fun way to strengthen students’ understanding of a grammatical or language point, as well as being an attractive venue for writing short stories. The rough draft presented here was part of a 7th-grade assignment to write English adaptations of local Micronesian legends. Students read finished, edited stories to younger grades. The stories are kept in a library or reading center for future use.

Writing to Pictures
This activity was successful in 4th- and 5th-grade classrooms. Students were each given an image with no words but at least one figural form. Each student had one minute to write a caption for his or her image. After a minute, students passed their image to the person sitting next to them in class. They continued doing this until every student had seen every image.

Looking for more?
Possible extensions include a synthesis of some of the ideas presented here:

• Students can draw pictures in response to music or poetry.
• Those pictures, as well as the leaf animals can be used as a catalyst for writing.
• Once writing is finished, the work can be the basis for a storybook.

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