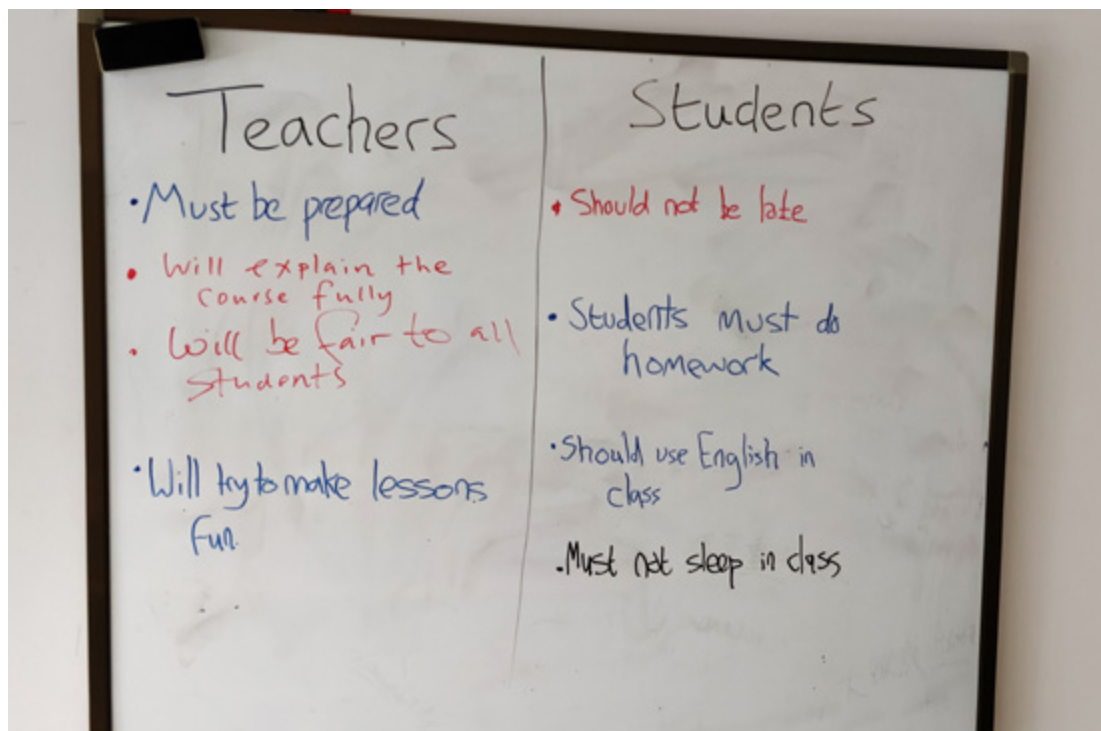


Classroom Contract

by SAM NEWBOULD



A list of suggested “rules” produced during brainstorming

Creating a “classroom contract” is an activity for teachers to increase learner engagement and students’ accountability for their own learning from the very first class. The contract is a set of rules and expected behavior, negotiated by the teacher and the students. Student engagement can be an issue in many classrooms, and any practice that helps keep the students focused in the classroom is beneficial to teaching and learning. By jointly negotiating expectations in the classroom, the teacher and the students alike are accountable for their actions. The contract also gives students a sense of autonomy and agency in their learning.

This activity is best done at the start of the semester or with any new class; it can be done in as little as 30 minutes but can be extended to 60 minutes, depending on the students’ level of English and how the teacher wants to

run the activity. I have successfully used the contract with all my students, primarily first-year Chinese university students of different majors who are enrolled in mandatory English classes. The technique has been used in a variety of classrooms, from high-tech classrooms with projectors and smartboards to low-tech classrooms with blackboards and chalk. The reason for implementing the contract was to give learners a sense of agency in their own classroom while at the same time anticipating and mitigating potential classroom-management problems, such as inappropriate use of cell phones in class, late arrivals, and other common problems that teachers encounter.

The activity starts with the teacher dividing the class into groups of four or five students and asking them to brainstorm the qualities of good students *and* good teachers that they would like to see in their classroom and

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learning environment. The teacher may have to provide an example or two, especially for lower-level students—for example, “The teacher should always be prepared for class” or “Students should attend class on time.” As this might take place in one of the first lessons of the semester, it is a good time for students to think about their future learning. The activity can be an informal discussion with the teacher monitoring; however, it is important that students take notes on their ideas, as they will be used later. Once discussions are finished, whole-class feedback can be done with groups invited to share their ideas with the class.

The teacher then elicits or introduces the idea of a “contract.” It may be easiest to explain a contract as an “agreement” between two people or parties (in this case, the two parties are the students and the teacher). Pictures are also useful to help solidify the concept in students’ minds. The goal should be for students to understand that the contract is a set of ideal classroom practices and behavior and that it is for both themselves and the teacher.

Once students understand the notion of a contract, the teacher reminds them of the qualities of good teachers and good students—brainstormed in the previous step—and explains that these can be used to create the rules and guidelines for the classroom contract. At this stage, it is also useful to introduce or review the vocabulary items that students might need; modal verbs are useful (e.g., *should/should not, must/must not*) along with forms of the verb *to be* (e.g., *are/aren’t, is/isn’t*).

Students then work together in groups to make a classroom contract. While some teachers may be hesitant to let students suggest rules that the teacher must follow, in my experience this has not been an issue. The students’ suggestions are often along the

lines of being prepared for classes, assigning a reasonable homework load, rewarding good behavior, and not being too strict. In my experience, there has never been an instance of an unreasonable request by students.

Teachers who are uncomfortable with letting the students decide points to include in the contract could pre-prepare their side of the contract with standard teacher responsibility points such as, “The teacher will try to make learning interesting,” “The teacher will be fair to all students,” “The teacher will let students know how they are being graded/evaluated before an assignment or test,” and “The teacher will make sure homework helps students reach their learning goals.”

To conclude the discussion, the teacher invites students to write their suggestions on the board or a large piece of paper (or more than one piece), which has “Teacher” and “Students” sections. Be prepared for humorous suggestions such as “no homework,” “handsome teacher,” and “only play games” to be among the things written. Common points that are suggested for students are “must do homework,” “don’t be late,” and “be prepared to learn.” For the teacher, common suggestions include “be prepared to teach,” “make lessons interesting,” and “don’t be too strict.”

After suggestions have been written, the teacher then negotiates each point’s inclusion in the final contract for both students and the teacher. Again, this is an opportunity for guided language practice with modals or imperatives: “Students should . . .,” “The teacher will . . .,” “Everyone must . . .,” and so on. Additionally, it may be beneficial to classroom rapport if students word their rules in a positive light—for example, “Students will attend classes on time” rather than “Students must not be late.”

Certain points—such as those regarding the use of cell phones and the L1 in class—are recommended to be nonnegotiable, depending on the teacher. The teacher should make clear that rules of the school or institution must be followed. In the case of the school’s regulations, the teacher can explain or lead a discussion on why those regulations are in place. It is also helpful to mention limits or exceptions, such as, “Cell phones can be used for dictionaries or research, but not for online shopping or social media.”

I have three points that are nonnegotiable for students:

1. Remember that mistakes are not bad. They help us learn.
2. We will always try and put our best effort into our work.
3. We will use mobile phones responsibly.

The last point, responsible mobile phone use, will depend on the context and the teacher; it is ultimately up to teachers or their institutions to decide what is appropriate for their situation. Personally, I like to add these nonnegotiable points at the end of the contract, as students may write these or similar rules into their version. That makes a good segue into explaining these contract terms and the reasons behind them—especially the points about mistakes and trying—in order to help create a better classroom environment.

Once the contract has been finalized, all students *and the teacher* sign the document. If the document is a piece of paper, this can be directly placed on a wall in the classroom. If the rules are written on the board, a photo can be taken, then posted online or printed.

The contract is not a tool for punishment but rather a reminder of ideal classroom behavior and practices that students and the teacher agree to. As the semester progresses,

if there is an instance of classroom behavior that goes against rules of the contract, the teacher can remind students of the contract they signed and agreed to follow. For example, if Student Y forgets to do his or her homework, the teacher could go over to the contract—if it is visible in the classroom—point at the student’s name, and say, “But, Y, you signed your name! You’re breaking the contract!” in a humorous and lighthearted way. In my experience, the other students also enjoy reminding one another of the agreement. In this way, the students have a sense of ownership, and they are more likely to respect the rules, as they had a part in creating them.

Consequences for breaking the contract vary. Some teachers, myself included, do not strictly use punishments with the contract; as explained above, it is used more as a reminder for students and an activity to help create a sense of community within the classroom. That said, students themselves may want the inclusion of a consequence to go along with breaking a point on the contract, and an attached statement of the consequence will serve to reinforce and remind students of the agreement.

Again, the actual consequence, if used, will depend on the teacher, students, and teaching institution, which may have existing rules that need to be followed. Something like singing a song for the class should be sufficient. My advice would be to keep it light, especially as the teacher is included in the contract!

Sam Newbould is an English teacher in China. He has experience teaching students in different contexts from a variety of backgrounds, especially in developing areas.

Photo by Sam Newbould