



# Urashimatarō

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**Ages:** 9–11 years old  
**Level:** Beginning  
**Culture:** Dramatized story of *Urashimatarō*;  
Japanese appreciation of nature  
**Japanese:** Overall review of beginning Japanese



## Objectives

I introduce my students to the way the Japanese view nature and relate to it in daily living. Every aspect of Japanese life and culture is deeply influenced by the country's climate and natural environment: food, clothing, and shelter, sense of color, poetry, music, annual events, leisure-time activities (such as the tea ceremony and flower arranging), entertainment, sports, religious belief, and many other areas—particularly children's songs, stories, games, festivals, and manners. The way the Japanese relate to nature is, I feel, an indispensable theme in explaining the Japanese people and their culture. "*Urashimatarō*" is a tale in which the relationship to nature, including animals, is especially spectacular, humorous, illusory, attractive, and sad. I created a play based on this story.

Like Japan, Canada, and particularly Victoria where I live, is favored with a mild climate, and tremendous effort has been devoted to preserving the great beauty of the natural environment. Canadians and Japanese, however, enjoy nature in very different ways. The greatest difference is that in North America, nature is something to be subjugated: Humans are always central; nature lies on the peripheries and must bend to human will. In Japan, however, humans are a part of nature, so they live in compliance with nature. I find this an interesting issue in cross-cultural understanding.

The national character of a people—their feelings about life and their worldview—seems to be expressed most simply and eloquently in children's

stories and fairy tales. Such stories make especially good teaching materials for my students, who range from kindergarten to fifth grade. While patterned on ancient stories, children's tales tell, in an interesting and easily understood fashion, what the Japanese consider to be important, fortunate, beautiful, ugly, delightful, or sad, and how they view the relationships between parent and child, man and woman, or rich and poor.

## Procedure

### A. Script for "*Urashimatarō*"

**Cast:** *Kōjō*  
*Kuroko*  
*Sensei* (ask another teacher to participate)  
*Seito*  
*Kodomo*  
*Kame*  
*Urashimatarō*  
*Otohime*  
*Sakana*  
*Murabito*

### Introduction(Open curtain halfway)

*Kōjō:* *Tozai tōzai, korekara 4 nensei no geki o omeni kakemasu.* We now present "*Urashimatarō*". I will introduce the *kuroko*.

*Kuroko 1:* In the Japanese traditional play *kabuki* or puppet show *bunraku*, the *kuroko* play an important role.

*Kuroko 2:* A *kuroko* is an assistant on the stage that



changes costumes and sets without closing the curtain and should be invisible.

*Kōjō, Kuroko 1,2: Soredewa minasan boku tachi no geki o otanoshimi kudasai.*



(*Urashimatarō* and *kame* travel.)

Under the Ocean

*Kame: Sā, tsukimashita. Otohime-sama, kochira ga Urashimatarō-san desu.*

*Otohime: Ryūgūjō e yōkoso. Sore kara kame no inochi o tasukete kudasatte arigatō gozaimashita.*

*Urashimatarō: Dōitashimashite.*

*Sakana 1: Sushi o dōzo meshiagare.*

*Sakana 2: Tempura o dōzo.*

*Sakana 3: Pizza wa ikaga desu ka?*

*Urashimatarō: Oishisō desu ne. Itadakimasu.*

*Otohime: I'd like to show you our garden. Ryūgūjō controls the four seasons on the land.*

*Sakana 5: Haru no niwa desu. (sing... 「春が来た」 "Haru ga Kita") In Japan, school starts in spring, the cherry blossom season.*

*Sakana 6: Natsu no niwa desu. (sing... 「七夕」 "Tanabata") The Japanese have a Tanabata festival where the people tie their wishes on a bamboo.*

*Sakana 7: Aki no niwa desu. (sing... 「里の秋」 "Sato no Aki") The most beautiful full moon comes in autumn, and there is a rabbit pounding rice cake in the moon.*

*Sakana 8: Fuyu no niwa desu. (sing... 「雪」 "Yuki") The biggest ceremony in the year is at New Year's. The Japanese clean their houses thoroughly by New Year's Eve and cook enough food to last for the first three days of the New Year when no one cooks.*

*Urashimatarō: Ah tanoshikatta, demo, boku wa otōsan to okāsan no tokoro e kaeranakereba narimasen.*

*Otohime: Onagori oshii desu ne. Then I will give this tamatebako to you, to serve as a memory of Ryūgūjō. The time that you have spent here is sealed in the box. Promise not to open this.*

*Urashimatarō: Wakarimashita. Dōmo arigatō gozaimashita. Sayōnara.*

*Otohime, all Sakana: Sayōnara.*

School Scene (Open curtain the rest of the way)

*Sensei: Good morning, everybody.*

*All Seito: Ohayō gozaimasu, —sensei.*

*Sensei: What is this?*

*Seito 1: Sore wa tsuru desu.*

*Sensei: Good. What is this?*

*Seito 2: Sore wa kame desu.*

*Sensei: Right. Today, we will be studying cranes and turtles. In Japan, they are symbols of happiness and a long life. We will learn why the Japanese appreciate them.*

(Close curtain)

On the Beach (Children appear poking at turtle)

*Kodomo 1: Wai wai, Kame-san dōshite sonnani noroino?*

*Kodomo 2: Motto hayaku aruke.*

*Kodomo 3: Omae no kubi wa doko da?*

*Kodomo 4: Omae no te wa doko da?*

*Kodomo 5: Omae no ashi wa doko da?*

*Kodomo 6: Ashi o dase.*

*Kodomo 7: Te o dase.*

*Kame: (cries)*

(*Urashimatarō* appears carrying fishing rod)

*Urashimatarō: Kore kore minna, kame o ijimetewa ikemasen.*

*Kodomo 2: Boku tachi no kame da.*

*Urashimatarō: Dewa boku ga kaimashō. Ikura desu ka?*

*Kodomo 6: 700 en da.*

*Urashimatarō: Hora 700 en.*

*Kodomo: Hai minna 100 en zutsu.*

*All Kodomo: Wai wai, 100 en da.*

*Kame: Urashimatarō-san, dōmo arigatō gozaimasu.*

*Urashimatarō: Dōitashimashite. Daijōbu desu ka?*

*Kame: Hai daijōbu desu. I would like to take you to the Ryūgūjō under the ocean where Otohime-sama, our queen, wishes to express her thanks to you for saving my life.*



### On the Beach

Urashimatarō: *Sumimasen, Urashima to iu uchi o shirimasen ka.*

Murabito 1: *Sā, shirimasen ne.*

Murabito 2: *Anata wa dare desu ka?*

Urashimatarō: *Watashi wa Urashimatarō desu.*

Murabito 3: *Sā, sonna hito wa shirimasen ne.*

Murabito 4: *Mita koto nai desu ne.*

Murabito 5: *Shirimasen.*

Murabito 6: *Ah sō da, my great grandfather told me that a long time ago, a young man went into the ocean on the back of a turtle and never came back again. His name was Urashimatarō.*

Murabito 7: *Sō da, sō da. Watashi mo kiita koto ga aru.*

Urashimatarō: *Ah, dōshiyō... Watashi wa hitori botchi ka. Sō da, kono hako o akete miyō.*

(Kuroko puts a white beard on Urashimatarō)

Murabito 8: *Ah. 100 sai no ojisan da.*

Murabito 9: *Wā, fushigi da. Fushigi da.*

Otohome: *Urashimatarō-san. I told you not to open the tamatebako so that you could stay young and live forever. You saved the life of the turtle, and yet you treat your own life poorly. To express my gratitude, I will change you into a crane, and you and the turtle will live together in happiness for a long time.*

### School Scene

Sensei: Now you know why the Japanese appreciate the *tsuru* and *kame* and how they became the symbols of long life and happiness.

Seito 3: *Hai, wakarimashita.*

Seito 4: *Sensei, kore ga origami no tsuru to kame desu.*

Sensei: I see. That is nice. That's all for today. *Kiritsu.* (everyone stands) *Minasan sayōnara.*

All Seito: *Sayōnara, Sensei.*

(Close curtain)

### B. Advantages of Putting on a Play

1. Putting on a play allows students to get away from the usual classroom format of teaching and

learning and enables them to get an all-round, physical experience of Japanese language and culture by acting it out on the stage.

2. It facilitates comparison with the students' own culture and provides a good opportunity for them to take a second look at things they have generally forgotten or tend to forget.
3. Activities building up to the day of the performance—beginning with drawing posters and including watching videos related to the play—raise class morale because all the students go about their lessons with a sense of purpose.
4. Roles can be assigned to give students who are ordinarily retiring an opportunity to make use of their individual abilities.
5. Canadian kids are assertive and good at expressing themselves, and they love to act on the stage, so a play is an effective learning medium for both teacher and students.

### C. Advantages of "Urashimatarō"

1. Because my students (and audience) are young, I decided against tales like "*Momotarō*," "*Hanasaka Jiisan*," and "*Kachikachi Yama*," which are interesting stories but have violent scenes that concerned me; these children are also too young for "*Kaguyahime*."

The play was made a part of the ordinary curriculum rather than a special activity, so it was necessary to create parts and lines that would give all the children (40 students) equal opportunity to appear on stage. "*Urashimatarō*" provides flexibility in this respect, and the story is lovely throughout, making it perfect for both the performers and the audience.

2. Because many different elements can be incorporated into this drama, it can be related to other teaching materials. Integrating it organically with social studies, science, music, art, and other subjects can arouse a wholesome desire for knowledge in the students.



#### D. Points Given Special Attention

1. So that the audience (Canadian children from kindergarten through fifth grade, their families, and others) and, of course, the students in the play would get the gist of the story and also understand the Japanese style of expression, I made half of the lines in English. Simply memorizing Japanese that is not understood makes the play less enjoyable for both the actors and the audience—it is more like a form of torture. I focused the Japanese lines on words and sentences that the children had already learned and on parts of the play where lack of understanding would not obscure the story line; the rest was in English.

For the same reason, and also to give a glimpse of our everyday Japanese class, I added a classroom scene at the beginning and end of the play, providing explanations to supplement the play. I got one of the Canadian teachers (the physical education teacher on this occasion) to play the role of the Japanese teacher, adding humor and a feeling of familiarity. The Canadian teacher made a few mistakes, which contributed greatly to the success of my plan.

2. To arouse interest in classical entertainment forms and cover technical difficulties in some parts of the play, I introduced the *kuroko* (stagehands dressed in black to make them inconspicuous) used in *kabuki*, *bunraku*, and other traditional Japanese theater forms. The presence of *kuroko* also facilitate explanation of the Japanese cultural pattern of imagination or illusion (*tsumori bunka*)—imagining that a thing cannot be seen, imagining that something exists (such as the illusion that privacy is being maintained with paper doors), and the dichotomy of *tatemaie* (ideal or apparent reality) and *honne* (true feelings). Concepts that are the direct antithesis of Western rationalism are interesting.

3. As a way of getting the fifth graders involved in the play and creating links between Japanese culture and their own lives, I got them to write

the subjects in which they wanted to get good test grades in *hiragana* on the strips of paper used for the *Tanabata* festival scene. As a side episode, in my search for bamboo that would be suitable to use for *Tanabata* scene, I knocked on the door of a house I happened to pass in the car. It turned out that the couple living there were very fond of Japan and Japanese pottery and had traveled all over the country assembling a collection. When they learned what I wanted the bamboo for, they very graciously allowed me to cut some and even came to see the play. Our play thus provided a fortuitous opportunity to create good relations between the school and the community.

4. To teach my students how the crane and tortoise are melded into Japanese life as auspicious symbols, I had taken to class various items bearing this motif that I happened to have at hand: some indigo cloth, *Imari* tableware, a crane and tortoise betrothal ceremony decoration made of gold and silver paper cord, a three-tiered lacquered box, the Japan Airlines logo, and other things. These were displayed in the auditorium on the day of the play and drew much attention from antique-loving parents.

5. For the banquet scene at the palace, *Ryūgūjō*, I included pizza, *Pokky* (a straight chocolate-covered pretzel), and other Canadian kids' party favorites.

6. It was impossible to costume all the children in *kimono*, so I symbolized Japanese dress with just the collar and *obi*. Trying to be too faithful to Japanese style can sometimes make understanding more difficult for Canadians, so it is not always necessary to make everything true to Japanese form.



#### E. Preventing Confusion of Japanese Life Past and Present

I begin old stories with "Once upon a time," so most of my students vaguely realize that this is not the way Japan is today, but sometimes they get confused about life in the past and nowadays. The school librarian is aiming to create "three-dimensional classrooms" and provides support for freely planned lessons that reach out vertically and horizontally, even involving the entire school, so I have requested that present-day Japan be introduced during the library hour. In addition, when I show videos of recent television programs, I leave the commercials in.

Above all, contemporary Japan is international in every respect, so hardly anyone thinks there are still *samurai* roaming the streets. On the contrary, there are far more questions about cram schools, people dying from overwork, juvenile suicide, and the high cost of living.

#### F. Response from Other Teachers

Although the play was handmade and not very polished, it was well received by the other teachers, who were very impressed by its warmth and the comprehensibility of my intent. They felt that legends, myths, and fairy tales were good teaching materials because of their clarity and comprehensibility, as well as being something the children were interested in. So later a school-wide event, given the name "A Magical Myth-tery Tour," was held, in which the students acted out a television crew's journey to cover Greek myths, Japanese fairy tales, and American Indian legends. My class did "*Kasa Jizō*." For future productions, I am working on plans to do Japanese ghosts and something for comparison of Canadian and Japanese annual events from January through December.

#### Student Response

"It was interesting because the story resembles 'Rip Van Winkle.'"

"I got to know Japanese customs."

"I learned that the crane is an auspicious symbol and got a good understanding of the significance of the 'thousand cranes.'" (In October, around the time of Canada's Remembrance Day, the fourth-grade English classes read *Sadako no Sembazuru*, so I taught the Japanese classes how to fold paper cranes; these are being saved up until we get a thousand of them.)

"I cannot forget the words and sentences used in the play; since then, I have been able to use them freely in class, making composition easy for me."

"The play was fun because everyone worked together."

Since the play, the students have become able to put feeling into greetings and emotional expressions, rather than simply repeating the words, and to connect them with what they have learned before.

They seem to have gained a good understanding of the way things in the natural world have been made an integral part of Japanese life as various kinds of symbols. They seem, for example, to have accepted smoothly the view of the cosmos—heaven, earth, and humans—expressed in flower arrangement. Or on the day after a full moon, the students will tell me they saw the rabbit in the moon.

I was most deeply impressed by how well the students memorized the lines and songs and carried out their parts, even though they had tests coming up. I was very moved by the children's strong sense of responsibility. I felt that my relationship with the students had gotten warmer and closer.

Although it is impossible to isolate specific aspects of Japanese culture, it is clear that the children came to feel closer to Japan and the Japanese people and language. I think this is an important result that will give them motivation to continue their study of the language.



## Comments from the Feedback Committee

### **Educating for Cross-cultural Understanding**

This class was really well-organized. It was fun to watch the attached video. We could see that all the students enjoyed doing the play. This is probably the most important point when teaching children.

Generally speaking, introducing old stories in a foreign language class can be misleading. Students don't usually have enough information about the culture, so when they get some information through old stories, they could think it is an accurate picture of the country and culture as it is now. Teachers might want to de-emphasize cultural differences in this respect.

In this play the children use both English and Japanese. This is very thoughtful on the teacher's part. Even in Japan, when teaching old stories, teachers will often translate old expressions to modern colloquial expressions and change the settings to the modern world because they are too unfamiliar and difficult for students.

The choice of "*Urashimatarō*" from Japanese folk literature certainly offered a variety of learning experiences for these 9-to-11-year-old students. Without Ms. Larsen's organization and the cooperation of the other teachers, this production would not have been possible. In addition, the emphasis on Japanese language and culture education in the school certainly contributed to the success of this performance.

I believe that teaching young children is best done through an integrated approach. To further develop this lesson along those lines, teachers could introduce a study of a fisherman's life in Japan. This would allow them to integrate a study of the geography of Japan, emphasizing how Japan is made up of four main islands bounded by the Pacific Ocean, the Sea of Okhotsk, the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea. Both cold and warm currents meet in the Sea of Japan and the Pacific Ocean. Thus, these

areas abound with a variety of plankton, which attracts a variety of fishes. It was only natural that Japanese people who lived on the coast were mostly fishermen in olden times. Their diet depended on fresh sea food and vegetables. This can be compared with Canadian coastal life styles. Between the two, students may find many differences. Japanese fishermen were totally dependent on the sea. The sea was their life. Thus, the old tale of a fisherman and the idea of an underwater world with a different sense of time would begin to make more sense to the Canadian students.

Older elementary students would probably find researching such a variety of topics in relation to "*Urashimatarō*" stimulating and meaningful. Individual students might work on a topic of their own and do research in the library or even through a computer. Other students might explore the use of symbols in different countries. For example, the *tsuru* and *kame* are symbols of a long, happy life in Japan. What symbols are used in Canada? Such research could make an interesting presentation or display to accompany the production of the play.

The study could be extended in English language arts with assignments to rewrite the story using such ideas as "What if *Urashimatarō* had not opened the box?" or "What if *Urashimatarō* returned to the beach now?"

### **Language Learning**

In extending this project, be sure to maintain the language connection, continuing to introduce and build the vocabulary and sentence structures the students need. I believe that such extensions can be powerful motivating forces for students to learn more. The more questions they ask the better. As they question, they can deepen their understanding of the culture and the language.