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Home robots on sale in Japan

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17 September, 2005

THE ARTICLE

Home robots on sale in Japan

A Japanese manufacturer unveiled a futuristic home robot on September 16, which may consign housework to be a thing of the past – for the rich. Mitsubishi Heavy Industries started selling its internet-linked, meter-high Wakamaru robot with an astronomic price tag of \$150,000. Just 100 of the home helps will initially be available. The robot is the brainchild of renowned Japanese designer Toshiyuki Kita, who said his creation was “designed in the shape of a human being so that it is not considered simply a machine”. He added the robot has an “independent personality” and that its “cute expression and form make it appear friendly to everyone”. Wakamaru is the end product of a collaboration with six other companies.

The robot packs an impressive array of features. It is capable of recognizing up to ten individuals by name, it has a vocabulary of 10,000 words and can navigate its way around the house. The Wakamaru website cites three major functions that will enrich and aid the lives of its users: “He enables natural and enriched communication in accordance with real-life situations; he acts autonomously according to his own life rhythm; and he provides information and service by accessing the Internet.” This means he can remind you to exercise, take phone messages and greet friends when they visit. Wakamaru is an innovative marvel of gadgetry and an impressive feat of robotics. However, it needs a commensurate innovation in price reduction to make it affordable by all.

WARM-UPS

1. I'M A ROBOT: You are now a robot. Decide what you can do and what your major functions are. Walk around the class and talk to other "robots" about your lives.

2. HOME ROBOT: If you had a home robot, what would you want it to do? Look at the following functions and features and talk about which ones appeal to you.

- a. The robot can talk. It has a vocabulary of 10,000 words.
- b. It can recognize your face and say "good morning".
- c. It can tell you when you have e-mail and read it to you.
- d. When you are not at home, it will alert you by e-mail of burglars.
- e. You can connect with it via a cell phone and see what it sees with its camera.
- f. It makes toast and coffee in the morning.
- g. It gives you advice on what to wear to work / school / a party.
- h. It will answer and open the front door.

3. MOVIES: In pairs / groups, talk to your partner about robot movies. Here is a list that may jog your memory: *RoboCop*, *Terminator*, *Matrix*, *Inspector Gadget*, *The Six-Million Dollar Man*, *The Bionic Woman*, *AI (Artificial Intelligence)*, *Bladerunner*, *Tron*, *I, Robot* ... Talk about robotic characters in your own country.

4. CHAT: In pairs / groups, decide which of these topics or words are most interesting and which are most boring.

Japanese manufacturers / futuristic homes / home robots / housework / Mitsubishi / brainchilds / cute expressions / large vocabulary / accessing the Internet / gadgetry

Have a chat about the topics you liked. For more conversation, change topics and partners frequently.

5. ROBOT: Spend one minute writing down all of the different words you associate with the word "robot". Share your words with your partner(s) and talk about them. Together, put the words into different categories.

6. 2-MINUTE DEBATES: Engage in the following (for-fun) 2-minute debates. Students A take the first argument, students B the second. Change partners often.

- a. Robots will control us one day. vs. Impossible.
- b. Robots will give us more free time. vs. Something else will take up our time.
- c. Robots are scary. vs. Don't be ridiculous.
- d. Robots will make us lazier and fatter. vs. Robots will help us exercise.
- e. Robots will be more intelligent than us. vs. We will always be more intelligent.
- f. One day, it will be difficult to tell humans and robots apart. vs. Impossible.
- g. Robots will attack humans in the future. vs. Impossible.
- h. Robots will always be too expensive for most people. vs. Prices will tumble.

BEFORE READING / LISTENING

1. TRUE / FALSE: Look at the article's headline and guess whether these sentences are true (T) or false (F):

- | | |
|---|-------|
| a. You can now buy a robot in convenience stores in Japan. | T / F |
| b. Housework has become a thing of the past in Japan. | T / F |
| c. A new robot is on sale in Japan for \$150,000. | T / F |
| d. The robot has an independent personality and a cute expression. | T / F |
| e. The robot has a vocabulary of 10,000 words. | T / F |
| f. The robot can help its owners become rich and live longer lives. | T / F |
| g. The robot will remind you to exercise. | T / F |
| h. It is a marvel of gadgetry and an impressive feat of robotics. | T / F |

2. SYNONYM MATCH: Match the following synonyms from the article:

- | | |
|------------------|-------------|
| a. unveiled | collection |
| b. consign | achievement |
| c. astronomic | idea |
| d. brainchild | quotes |
| e. collaboration | relegate |
| f. array | equivalent |
| g. cites | revealed |
| h. marvel | collusion |
| i. feat | wonder |
| j. commensurate | whopping |

3. PHRASE MATCH: Match the following phrases from the article (sometimes more than one combination is possible):

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| a. A Japanese manufacturer | renowned Japanese designer ... |
| b. consign housework to be | to ten individuals by name |
| c. an astronomic price | of gadgetry |
| d. the robot is the brainchild of | with six other companies |
| e. the end product of a collaboration | unveiled a futuristic home robot |
| f. The robot packs an impressive | innovation in price reduction |
| g. It is capable of recognizing up | a thing of the past |
| h. an innovative marvel | robotics |
| i. impressive feat of | tag of \$150,000 |
| j. it needs a commensurate | array of features |

WHILE READING / LISTENING

GAP FILL: Put the words in the column on the right into the gaps in the text.

Home robots on sale in Japan

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The robot _____ an impressive array of features. It is _____ of recognizing up to ten individuals by name, it has a vocabulary of 10,000 words and can navigate its _____ around the house. The Wakamaru website cites three major functions that will _____ and aid the lives of its users: “He enables natural and enriched communication in _____ with real-life situations; he acts autonomously according to his own life rhythm; and he provides information and service by _____ the Internet.” This means he can remind you to exercise, take phone messages and greet friends when they visit. Wakamaru is an innovative _____ of gadgetry and an impressive feat of robotics. However, it needs a commensurate innovation in price reduction to make it _____ by all.

initially
form
tag
unveiled
product
creation
considered
consign
capable
enrich
marvel
packs
accordance
affordable
way
accessing

AFTER READING / LISTENING

1. WORD SEARCH: Look in your dictionaries / computer to find collocates, other meanings, information, synonyms ... for the words 'brain' and 'child'.

- Share your findings with your partners.
- Make questions using the words you found.
- Ask your partner / group your questions.

2. ARTICLE QUESTIONS: Look back at the article and write down some questions you would like to ask the class about the text.

- Share your questions with other classmates / groups.
- Ask your partner / group your questions.

3. GAP FILL: In pairs / groups, compare your answers to this exercise. Check your answers. Talk about the words from the gap fill. Were they new, interesting, worth learning...?

4. VOCABULARY: Circle any words you do not understand. In groups, pool unknown words and use dictionaries to find their meanings.

5. STUDENT "ROBOT" SURVEY: In pairs / groups, write down questions about robots and their roles in our future.

- Ask other classmates your questions and note down their answers.
- Go back to your original partner / group and compare your findings.
- Make mini-presentations to other groups on your findings.

6. TEST EACH OTHER: Look at the words below. With your partner, try to recall exactly how these were used in the text:

- | | |
|-----------------|----------------|
| • unveiled | • impressive |
| • astronomic | • navigate |
| • initially | • autonomously |
| • shape | • exercise |
| • cute | • marvel |
| • collaboration | • commensurate |

DISCUSSION

STUDENT A's QUESTIONS (Do not show these to student B)

- a. What were your initial thoughts on this headline?
- b. Did the headline make you want to read the article?
- c. What do you think about Wakamaru?
- d. What do you think of the idea of robots?
- e. Do you think robots will become more intelligent than humans?
- f. Do you think it will become difficult to tell humans and robots apart?
- g. What would you want your robot to look like?
- h. What would you want your robot to do?
- i. How much would you be willing to pay for a very useful robot?
- j. Would you require your robot to have an independent personality?

STUDENT B's QUESTIONS (Do not show these to student A)

- a. Did you like reading this article?
- b. What do you think about what you read?
- c. What adjectives describe your feelings about this article?
- d. Do you think you would ever be afraid of a robot?
- e. When do you think robots will be as common as cars?
- f. Do you think you would have conversations with a robot?
- g. Do you think a home robot would greatly enrich your life?
- h. Are you interested in gadgets and robotics?
- i. Do you want a Wakamaru?
- j. Did you like this discussion?

AFTER DISCUSSION: Join another partner / group and tell them what you talked about.

- a. What question would you like to ask about this topic?
- b. What was the most interesting thing you heard?
- c. Was there a question you didn't like?
- d. Was there something you totally disagreed with?
- e. What did you like talking about?
- f. Do you want to know how anyone else answered the questions?
- g. Which was the most difficult question?

SPEAKING

MARVEL ROBOT: You are CEO of the Marvel Robot company. You must design a new robot to compete with Mitsubishi's Wakamaru robot. In pairs / groups, decide on the areas in the column on the left:

AREAS	DECISIONS
Name	
Shape	
Communicative abilities	
Ability to recognize people	
Functions	
Mobility	
Secret ability	

Change partners and show each other what your robot designs. Give each other feedback on how to make the robots better.

Present your designs to other groups. Ask and answer questions.

Vote on the best robot.

LISTENING

Listen and fill in the spaces.

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HOMEWORK

1. VOCABULARY EXTENSION: Choose several of the words from the text. Use a dictionary or Google's search field (or another search engine) to build up more associations / collocations of each word.

2. INTERNET: Search the Internet and find more information on Wakamaru. Share your findings with your class in the next lesson.

3. MY ROBOT: Make the plans for your own robot. Explain all of its features and functions. Show your plans to your classmates in your next lesson. Did you all have similar ideas?

4. DIARY / JOURNAL: You are Wakamaru. Write your diary / journal entry for one day in your life. Write about your feelings towards your owner. Read your diary / journal to your classmates in the next lesson. Did you all write about similar things?

ANSWERS

TRUE / FALSE:

- a. F b. F c. T d. T e. T f. F g. T h. T

SYNONYM MATCH:

- | | |
|------------------|-------------|
| a. unveiled | revealed |
| b. consign | relegate |
| c. astronomic | whopping |
| d. brainchild | idea |
| e. collaboration | collusion |
| f. array | collection |
| g. cites | quotes |
| h. marvel | wonder |
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| b. consign housework to be | a thing of the past |
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| g. It is capable of recognizing up | to ten individuals by name |
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GAP FILL:

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