S.Korea schools get robot English teachers
28 December 2010, by Jung Ha-Won

An English-teaching robot (R), "Engkey", stands in front of children at an elementary school in Daegu, southeast of Seoul. The 29 robots, about one metre (3.3 feet) high with a TV display panel for a face, wheeled around the classroom while speaking to the students, reading books to them and dancing to music by moving their head and arms.

Almost 30 robots have started teaching English to youngsters in a South Korean city, education officials said Tuesday, in a pilot project designed to nurture the nascent robot industry.

Engkey, a white, egg-shaped robot developed by the Korea Institute of Science of Technology (KIST), began taking classes Monday at 21 elementary schools in the southeastern city of Daegu.

The 29 robots, about one metre (3.3 feet) high with a TV display panel for a face, wheeled around the classroom while speaking to the students, reading books to them and dancing to music by moving their head and arms.

The robots, which display an avatar face of a Caucasian woman, are controlled remotely by teachers of English in the Philippines -- who can see and hear the children via a remote control system.

Cameras detect the Filipino teachers' facial expressions and instantly reflect them on the avatar's face, said Sagong Seong-Dae, a senior scientist at KIST.

"Well-educated, experienced Filipino teachers are far cheaper than their counterparts elsewhere, including South Korea," he told AFP.

Apart from reading books, the robots use pre-programmed software to sing songs and play alphabet games with the children.

"The kids seemed to love it since the robots look, well, cute and interesting. But some adults also expressed interest, saying they may feel less nervous talking to robots than a real person," said Kim Mi-Young, an official at Daegu city education office.

Kim said some may be sent to remote rural areas of South Korea shunned by foreign English teachers.

She said the robots are still being tested. But officials might consider hiring them full time if scientists upgrade them and make them easier to handle and more affordable.

"Having robots in the classroom makes the students more active in participating, especially shy ones afraid of speaking out to human teachers," Kim said.

She stressed the experiment was not about replacing human teachers with robots. "We are helping upgrade a key, strategic industry and all the while giving children more interest in what they learn."

The four-month pilot programme was sponsored by the government, which invested 1.58 billion won (1.37 million dollars).

Scientists have held pilot programmes in schools since 2009 to develop robots to teach English, maths, science and other subjects at different levels with a desired price tag of five to eight million
Sagong stressed that the robots, which currently cost 10 million won each, largely back up human teachers but would eventually have a bigger role.

The machines can be an efficient tool to hone language skills for many people who feel nervous about conversing with flesh-and-blood foreigners, he said.

"Plus, they won't complain about health insurance, sick leave and severance package, or leave in three months for a better-paying job in Japan... all you need is a repair and upgrade every once in a while."

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