



Using Integrated Formative Evaluation and Adaptive Instruction to Ensure **RTI SUCCESS**

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When learners are not performing well, changes need to be made and learner performance reevaluated in an iterative process until performance improves. I'm sure few would disagree, but how is this improvement to be accomplished? Though some progress has perhaps been made, over the past few years it has become increasingly clear that simply examining summative, end-of-the-year test scores on state or national assessments is not the answer. Often, by the time it is known that students are struggling, they have moved on, or out.

A consensus is growing that what is needed is the systematic use of much more frequent classroom assessment, otherwise known as formative evaluation. When used effectively, this type of evaluation helps to “form” the instruction, as the name implies, as well as to inform evaluators. Forming as well as informing classroom practice is, of course, the hard part. To properly accomplish this requires one to teach, evaluate, change the teaching strategy, evaluate again, and so on until each learner is performing according to standards. Faced with a room full of students, adding continual evaluation, along with a cookbook of intervention recipes from various sources, places a huge burden on already overtaxed teachers. Research over the past several years has found that in a typical reading period, learners may receive as little as seven minutes of active or accountable instruction. How is a teacher to individualize instruction, collect data, review and interpret the data, change instruction for some, maintain it for others, teach the group, and respond to individual needs?

We at Headsprout have been thinking about this very problem for many years. We wanted a way to help level the “playing field” for teachers. Our goal was, and is, to provide students with an adaptive, easy-to-use individualized program that responds to learner needs, and provides teachers with students eager to learn and with the skills necessary to benefit from classroom instruction.

After years of research and development, forming the center of our approach is Headsprout™ early reading, our 80-lesson, online beginning reading program. It was designed and written to ensure that beginning readers master the reading skills necessary to be at or above their grade level. While formative evaluation is now beginning to be discussed as an essential element to making instruction more effective, it has been part of the Headsprout “DNA” from the very beginning. Every activity and lesson was tested with children, one child at a time, until every activity and lesson produced the outcome for which they were intended. If a learner made errors, the activity or lesson was rewritten, and more learners tried it. This process was repeated until we could be sure that every student was learning.

But our commitment to formative assessment did not only apply to evaluating our program. We actually integrated formative assessment into the program. Each response a learner makes is tracked; learner error patterns are assessed and teaching routines changed based on that assessment. If one were to track the path of 1,000 different learners through the program, one would see 1,000 individual paths. It is the perfect companion to any core reading program a teacher decides to use. We have published extensively on our process; copies of our publications can be found on the Headsprout website

Now, we have extended our integrated formative evaluation approach to provide teachers with the tools they need to provide a continuous Response to Intervention (Rtl) process that scaffolds to meet the needs of students who may require more help. To further ensure learner success with Headsprout Early Reading, we have added another layer of independent formative assessments, referenced to specific included interventions, that change to meet the needs of learners in need of Tier 1, 2, or 3 interventions.

Tier 1: Prevention & Early Intervention

For Tier 1 students, the emphasis is on prevention. Learners, who may enter the Headsprout program with a wide variety of skills and backgrounds, exit with a firm foundation in early reading decoding and comprehension skills. Early problems are assessed and addressed within the 80 online lessons, often preventing these problems from growing into major deficits that require intensive remediation in the years ahead.

Teachers are provided with a wide range of reports on student progress. Further, 12 benchmark reading evaluations are provided, which help teachers make sure progress is being made. While most problems are detected and corrected within the program's integrated formative evaluation system, specific recommendations are provided if problems arise. These recommendations are based on carefully designed guided practice exercises.

Learners receive, on average, over 20 minutes of accountable, differentiated instruction with every lesson. The typical learner makes over 180 evaluated learning interactions each lesson, solely via the “click” of a mouse—no keyboard is used. Accordingly, for Tier 1 learners, we recommend the learners use the program three times per week, with about 30 instructional minutes dedicated to the program.

Though we provide a comprehensive three-tier intervention strategy, we have found that most students who:

- complete the 80 lessons
- speak out loud when asked to do so by the program
- read the 80 stories that come with the program
- receive the recommended additional practice when independent benchmarks indicate a problem

need little extra intervention to achieve grade-level or above performance. Schools using the Headsprout program as described have reported substantial declines in Rtl and special needs referrals. This commitment to prevention solves many learner problems in Tier 1, as they arise, and allows teachers to focus directly on the remaining learners who need more help.

Tier 2: Targeted Intervention

From time to time, teachers may find that certain learners may need additional practice from what is recommended in the Tier 1 implementation of the Headsprout program. We have found that these learners greatly benefit from more frequent use of the online program (five times per week versus three), and from targeted regular use of the provided practice materials as they progress through the program. Guided, deliberate practice of what has been learned in each online lesson solves most problems. We have provided the exercises and easy-to-use guides on how to integrate the practice exercises into classroom reading activities. These activities have at their core an emphasis on group and peer-to-peer collaborative learning. Nearly moment-to-moment formative evaluation and accompanying recommendations provide the continual and accelerated improvement these learners need. For Tier 2 learners, we recommend the students use the program five times per week, with about 40 instructional minutes dedicated to the program and guided, deliberate practice.

Tier 3: Intensive Intervention

For the few remaining learners that may need more assistance, additional intensive evaluation, practice, and intervention strategies are provided to augment the Targeted Intervention already provided in Tier 2. After a set of specified lessons, each learner is assessed and specific recommendations to address problems found are provided to the teacher. These recommendations may include more 1:1 guided practice or repeating prescribed online lessons. The skills assessed in each subset evaluation must be fully mastered before moving on to the next subset. For Tier 3 learners, we recommend using the program five times per week, with about 50 instructional minutes dedicated to the program and guided, deliberate practice.

A Manageable, Accountable Program

One problem that has plagued RtI implementations is the movement of students between tiers. Often, learners are transferred from one program to another, where they may find different materials, approaches, and classmates. Once adjusted to a new format and succeeding, Tier 2 or 3 learners may soon find themselves back trying to fit in with the lesson plan they left, only it has progressed and may seem quite different. This problem is virtually eliminated for Headsprout learners who simply continue on with the program. The change they experience is in the frequency of the online lessons and the intensity of the practice. These changes all fall on a familiar continuum, which can be increased or decreased as needed. Similarly, teachers find it easy to move along this continuum as well. Teachers need less time to master all the program components, since all are extensions of what they are already doing, and the foundation of all the tiers is Headsprout Early Reading. This leaves more time to meet individual needs and implement a core reading program as teachers see fit. Further, we provide an easy-to-use placement assessment to help target just the right instruction for working with older struggling readers.

We take professional development very seriously. Headsprout provides just the right amount of training and just-in-time professional development to make learning how to successfully implement a full RtI program easier than previously thought possible. Further, Headsprout is always there to help. We stand with the teachers using our program and are accountable to them. In the process of creating our highly acclaimed instructional and technical support, we emphasized listening to teachers about their needs. Each tier has its own customized support, and teachers will find that the support is not simply reactive, but is instead proactive. Because the lessons are online, Headsprout's teacher support team and automated alerts can often spot potential problems before they arise or grow too great. As students move to and from different tiers, the support changes to meet the needs of learners and teachers participating in those tiers.

To learn more about Headsprout's Early Reading sequence, Headsprout's approach to RtI, and Headsprout teaching technology, educational software, and training, visit [Headsprout.com](https://www.headsprout.com) or call 866.889.3729.

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