Understanding Linguistic Patterns: Uninflected *be* in African American English

Examining the data: Read each pair of sentences in list A, and decide which sentence in each pair sounds better. For example, in the first sentence pair, does it sound better to say, “They usually be tired when they come home” or “They be tired right now”? For each pair of sentences, place a check (✓) next to the sentence that sounds better with the *be*.

LIST A

1. a. ___ They usually be tired when they come home.  
   b. ___ They be tired right now.
2. a. ___ When we play basketball, she be on my team.  
   b. ___ The girl in the picture be my sister.
3. a. ___ James be coming to school right now.  
   b. ___ James always be coming to school.
4. a. ___ My ankle be broken from the fall.  
   b. ___ Sometimes my ears be itching.

Once we have gone over the answers, examine the data for a pattern:

Applying the rule: Now that you understand when African American English speakers use *be*, use your rule to predict whether or not a speaker of African American English would use the sentences in list B. Write Y for Yes if the sentence follows the dialect pattern, and N for No if it does not.

LIST B

1. ___ The students always be talking in class.
2. ___ The students don’t be talking right now.
3. ___ Sometimes the teacher be early for class.
4. ___ At the moment the teacher be in the lounge.
Answer Key

LIST A

1. a. √ They usually be tired when they come home.
   b. ___ They be tired right now.

2. a. √ When we play basketball, she be on my team.
   b. ___ The girl in the picture be my sister.

3. a. ___ James be coming to school right now.
   b. √ James always be coming to school.

4. a. ___ My ankle be broken from the fall.
   b. √ Sometimes my ears be itching.

Linguistic pattern:

An AAE speaker can use uninflected be when talking about an action that occurs habitually (and not an action that occurs once or a permanent state as in sentence 2b). In Standard English, these sentences require the use of an adverb such as usually, always, or sometimes.

LIST B

1. Y_The students always be talking in class.
2. N_The students don’t be talking right now.
3. Y_Sometimes the teacher be early for class.
4. N_At the moment the teacher be in the lounge.